

KITTEN BASED

# VIOLENCE ZERO

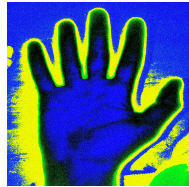
MORNING ON  
EARTH





# VIOLENCE ZERO: MORNING ON EARTH

Kitten Based



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# CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Intro](#)

[Dedication](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[The Music Mentioned and The Music I Listened to When Writing](#)

# INTRO

One morning, people everywhere start killing each other, driven by the ubiquitous force of Violence Zero. As the world switches, Roman wakes up to the sound of his neighbors fighting and screaming, and finds himself isolated in his apartment.

*To everyone I shared a laugh with, thank you for being you*







# 1

Roman left the office at 6 PM. Together with Daniela, they strolled to the Kontraktova subway station along the Alley between the Vals, talking about some nonsense at first, then switching to a discussion on abortions. They were both sure there was nothing wrong with it. Such conversations between them happened rarely, usually they chose a lighter topic.

That cold windy autumn evening she had her red coat on and looked like Little My. Roman had his old black coat on. He'd started wearing it while being a sophomore student.

He had quit studies the year before to focus on work entirely. At least it really paid off, the university hadn't made him any smarter.

"I mean," he was saying, breathing in the cold air. "It's not even a human, you know. As long as it's inside somebody else, it's just a parasite. There's nothing wrong with killing a parasite."

"Yeah, if you know you're not able to raise a kid..."

"Sure. I mean, it's better to be dead than to live in an orphanage or being raised by people who are completely unprepared. You would just be a problem and your whole life would be a mess. Better just die while you're still not... while you're an incomplete human." he giggled, she didn't.

Roman immediately shut up, assuming he'd said something offensive.

They were approaching the station. There were a lot of people coming home from work at that hour. You could suffocate in the train. With every next station the car would get more and more crowded, you could feel someone's heavy breathing fondling your neck.

*God, I wish I could just kill everyone with a chainsaw! Too bad killing is illegal. But, I mean, if it wasn't, I would get whacked pretty quickly.*

Roman considered himself a very weak and emotionally unstable person.

Daniela left the train at Maidan Nezalezhnosti station. She turned around and waved Roman good bye, smiling. She had a very bright smile, it was visible even under that black mask she was wearing. Roman waved Daniela back. He would never see her again.

It was the time the government was about to start pushing everybody towards vaccination. Daniela had done it twice, so had almost everybody in their team. Roman still hadn't.

*I won't until they make me do it. Or maybe if they start checking certificates in the streets, imposing fines, then I'll pretty much have to do it. Hate this shit, honestly, but... I mean, you gotta do as they say if you want to live and work peacefully. Everybody who's done it seems to be doing okay. I'm probably gonna be okay too. I mean, I have some heart issues... Goddamit. It would be so freaking funny if I died from it. Jesus. What a lame way to die, right?*

He exited at Lybidska and moved towards the escalators with a weary crowd of people. A lot of them wanted to finally get home and get some sleep on that Friday evening.

*Jesus Christ, no work tomorrow!*

*I could finally sleep as much as I want.*

*God, what the hell should I buy?! I haven't written a list! Again! Goddamn it!*

That last one was in Roman's head. He hadn't written himself a list again.

*Why don't you ever do this, you stupid piece of shit!*

He'd never done it in his life, not even once. He'd wanted to do it, though. A lot of times. Writing a grocery list was like traveling the world for him. It was already dark when he stepped out of the underpass in front of Interplaza.

*Well, you don't have to buy a lot of things anyway.*

That time, he was super wrong about it. The world he knew was about to end in less than eight hours.

Interplaza was that big supermarket filled with lots of different shops selling all kinds of stuff. There were souvenirs and glasses, clothes and books, flowers and contraceptives. In the bookstore there were also those

weird looking inappropriately small collection figures sold at inappropriately high prices.

Roman passed all of those shops half of which were already closing and entered a wide and loud market called Fora. Music was always playing there. The good one, too. Bob Marley, Hall and Oates, Elton John, a-ha. Great 80's and 90's songs. Roman loved it. The reason he was always willing to drive a cart along the isles for a little bit longer.

Roman bought a pack of macaroni, two bottles of non-carbonated Morshynska water, chips with cheese (to treat himself at the end of the week), four long and thick juicy cucumbers, five tomatoes and a loaf of white bread. With two medium-sized bags, he left Fora and climbed the gray stairs, always covered with spit and piss, that led to the residential area where Roman rented an apartment. He tottered home under the orange light of lanterns that had just been lit. The bag with the bottles of water was hitting the knee. It angered Roman. He was a very clumsy dude, sometimes things could just fall out of his hands.

The landing of his apartment building was empty and dirty. There was a big mirror on the first floor by the main entrance. Some of the residents had put it there years before.

Music could be heard behind the door of his neighbors, but Roman did not stop to listen. Why the hell? He always tried to hop up to his door as quickly as possible, did not want to meet anyone, did not like it. He thought if the neighbors knew he lived there alone, they could talk someone into breaking in while he was at work. Therefore, it was better if no one knew Roman lived there by himself, when he was in, when he was out. For a year and a half of living there, Roman had not seen his neighbors once. For him that was a success indeed.

He entered his apartment, put the bags on the floor, locked the door, took out the phone and called his mother. She worked the first shift that day and was already home. She was a doctor and lived in Lviv, they rarely saw each other. It's like a one-day drive from Lviv to Kyiv. So just paying a visit is already two days of being on the road. Neither of them liked the road.

“Mom, hi.”

“Hi, honey, are you home?”

“Yeah, just got back.”

“Fine. Did you buy everything you need?”

“Sure.”

“Did you close the door?”

“Yeah, mom, I closed it. No one’s gonna get me, no worries.”

“Fine... Well, then do what you need to do.”

Roman smiled. He was planning to jerk off before going to the shower.

“Yeah, mom, alright. I won’t call anymore today, alright? I’ll just write you good night.”

“Fine. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

“Bye.”

“Bye. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

It was 8 PM. Roman took off his coat, washed his hands and turned on a TV. The apartment seemed brighter and livelier with it. Roman always turned off the sound, though.

He stripped down to his underwear, took a little white summer sock out of a drawer, googled pictures of a blonde porn actress being gang banged by a group of muscular black guys and quickly jerked off in the bathroom with the lights off. *La vie est belle*, as the French would say.

Then he took a shower and cleaned his phone with wet wipes (he’d got used to doing it with the start of Covid).

It was time to cook something. Roman turned on the laptop that was on the kitchen table and started cooking macaroni. There was just enough for one meal in the last pack. Roman decided to save the vegetables for the weekend and just eat macaroni. Cooking was always accompanied by music from his laptop speakers. That evening he chose it to be ‘Spinning Away’ by John Cale and Brian Eno.

After dinner, he put the vegetables into the refrigerator and unpacked the bread. That's it, now he could relax and do nothing. He sat himself down in his black chair and started surfing the Internet. Switching from a Youtube

video to some beloved movie, then to some youtuber's reaction to some beloved movie. And then all over again.

He wasted his time as best he could. Sometimes he dug his Telegram for some news or messages. Just flipping through old dialogues, you know, looking at pictures someone sent him in the past. To get nostalgic about whatever for no reason whatsoever. He did it a lot in his free time. It didn't cure boredom very well, but at least it was something to do. That was enough.

It was 9:15 PM when he saw the news about an armed man from Sweden who had started shooting in the streets of Strömsund.

**Seventeen people died, doctors are fighting for the lives of seven.**

Roman did not pay much attention to this. He had read a similar piece of news the day before, about Italy. But fatigue did not let him remember it and make the connection. It wouldn't have affected anything anyway. Nobody knew it, but those incidents were two of Violence Zero's tryouts before the grand switch.

At 10 PM Roman put his phone on the charger, washed the dishes and dived into Youtube again. At 11:30 PM the phone was at 100%, and Roman was exhausted. His eyelids were heavy.

In a similarly gray Soviet apartment building across the children's playground, many widows were lit. While Roman waited for the laptop to charge up to 100, he wrote his mom Good night and brushed his teeth. Then he finally unplugged and turned off the laptop, double checked if the gas stove was switched off and went to bed.

He wandered off at about 12:15 AM on Saturday. The streets were still quiet at the time.

## 2

At 3 AM, Roman woke up from a strong knock on the wall.

At first, he did not understand what had happened. Then he thought something must have just fallen somewhere in the apartment – perhaps the remote, or something in the kitchen.

Then there was a loud scream and someone hit the wall very hard again. People were fighting and crying in the neighbors' apartment.

He jumped to his feet and chaotically put on his open toe slippers, his heart drumming wildly. The brawl behind the wall did not stop. Roman just stood and did not know what to do. He looked around. Outside the window, only the moonlight was shining, the apartments in the building opposite were dark.

*I should call the police...*

But as soon as he grabbed the phone, something in the apartment above him fell loudly on the floor. Something huge. He looked out the window again. Several windows in the building opposite were now lit up.

*So, it's happening there too. But what is happening? What the hell?!*

A few moments passed and screams were already coming from all directions, some were quieter, some were so loud you could think it was in your kitchen. Roman was holding the phone in his right hand, looking around as if he was trying to see something through the walls. Someone shouted loudly again. It was a woman. Again. Yes, no doubt, it was a woman.

And again, quieter screams elsewhere. Roman looked out the window again, now it seemed that the lights were on in more than half of the apartments in the building opposite. Someone shouted in the street. Roman started towards the window to look, but immediately stopped.

*Stay away from the windows, they might see you... Someone might see you.*

Fear engulfed him. His hands were shaking. The woman behind the wall screamed one last time.

Meanwhile, there were voices on the landing. Roman could not calm down.

*Damn, did I close the door? Yes, of course, but... I better... I have to check.*

Figuring there would be less noise if he walked barefoot, Roman quietly put his feet out of his slippers and tiptoed towards the front door of the apartment in his underpants and a pink t-shirt.

There was a loud knock on the door of his neighbors to the right.

“Sasha, are you there? Open the door, for Christ’s sake!”

A man was standing outside. He had a rough voice. Like a smoker does.

“Sasha, open the damn door, we’re having a shit storm here.”

No one answered the door for about a minute. Meanwhile, Roman considered dressing up and walking out, to inquire what kind of shit storm exactly was happening, but finally decided to wait for the neighbors to open the door.

*Maybe he’ll explain to them, maybe there’s no need for me to come out.*

He still didn't want anyone to know he lived there. His head was in a turmoil.

*Maybe it's... Maybe it's not that serious... Maybe he'll explain what's happened and then I'll relax and... go to sleep.*

He really did have that foolish hope. Then a woman opened the door. She only said, "Lyosha, what is it?" Her voice trembled. Then she screamed, a brawl started outside. Someone pushed someone against Roman's door, he shuddered, backed away in fear, stumbled, and almost fell to the floor.

Don’t forget, he was a very clumsy character.

Next, another male voice shouted, “What are you doing?! Hey! Let her go, you son of a bitch!”

And struggle again. Someone fell on the floor. Screams again. People calling other people by names. Shouting. Struggle. Shouting. More voices. More struggle again. Screams were coming from everywhere, but the ones behind the door were the loudest.



Roman stood by the door and listened for about a minute. The fight didn't last long. He could not decide on any particular actions.

*What the hell am I supposed to do?! What the hell is going on there? Shit... I've got to get out there, right? To help... Whom? From whom? What is happening? Someone's attacked someone. But why?*

His body stiffened. Except for his left hand fingers that were clenching and unclenching without him noticing. The right hand was holding a phone.

Then the fight was over, no one was screaming behind the door anymore, but someone was still out there, moving. The steps were uncertain, the person was limping away from the scene. Down the stairs. Roman came closer and looked into the peephole.

*Why didn't I do it earlier? What a moron... But no, they would've heard me... Good thing I've been quiet...*

Roman saw a tall man in a white shirt slowly coming down the stairs, and a woman with a bloody stomach lying on the floor. With a trembling chin, Roman mumbled to himself, "God... God, what's happening?! Jesus Christ... Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, what's happening?!"

He was an atheist, by the way.

Only the upper half of the woman's body was visible through the peephole. A blood stain on her gray sweater. Brown hair spread out on the floor. Obviously, there were more bodies. At least four people had been there.

Then there was a knock on the door downstairs.

*This murdering asshole is trying to get someone else now... But... Why? What the hell is going on?*

Roman moved away from the door, returned to the room. The heart was still beating so loud it seemed everyone in the building could hear it.

*Did they hear me? Are they gonna come for me? Who are they?*

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Finally, Roman unlocked his phone and clicked on a Telegram icon on the screen. It turned out the news channels had exploded about an hour before. Massive attacks and murders were reported across the globe. Roman quickly ran to the kitchen and turned on the laptop. He decided it was better

to not turn on the lights anywhere, so that no one outside could see him. It was a smart thing to do. He immediately lowered the screen brightness of the phone to a minimum. While the laptop was loading on, he called his mother. The call woke her up.

“Mom, are you okay?”

“Yeah... Roma, why are you calling?”

“I’m... We are... Well... We have some kind of a situation here, and I have no idea what it is, to be honest... Are you okay there? Everything’s alright?”

“I’ve been asleep. God... What’s happened?”

“I don't know, it seems like some kind of a... I don't know. Shit, I... I don't know. Wait a second. Do you maybe hear something? Maybe on the street, or in the building? Some noises or... something? Is there something... Because I woke up, like... I woke up, like, fifteen or... I don’t know, maybe twenty minutes ago, something like that, and there were, like, fights, you know, my neighbors were fighting and screaming and... like, some crazy shit, I don’t know...”

“Oh, God, yes, I *do* hear something! God, I was asleep, I didn't hear anything!”

“Just... Mom! Don't turn on the lights, okay?!” Roman realized he was talking too loudly. For the first time he noticed his chin was shaking like a leaf in the wind.

He tried to speak more quietly. The laptop finally turned on. Roman lowered its screen brightness as well. The battery was at 100%. Roman disconnected it from the charging wire and carried it to the room. “Mom, wait a second, okay? You... Umm... Yeah, mom, please, don't turn on the light, you hear me?!”

“Yes... I won’t...”

“And the TV! Do not turn on the TV! Shit... Or... I don’t know... Maybe... No, no, no, don’t do it, don't turn on the TV... They mustn’t see that you’re there...”

“Rom, someone is knocking on my door.”

“Don't answer! Just... keep it quiet! Mom, is your door locked?! Is the... is the door locked?!”

“Yes... God... Rom, what is this? And who is this?”

“It might be the neighbors, but don't open the door. This is what it... this is how it is here... I think... It's like some mass madness... Goddamn it... Mom, I seriously don't know. Just sit in your room and... Be quiet! I'm gonna try to find something... I'm... I'm trying to find out what's happening, maybe there are some... I don't know, maybe there's some news on the Internet... I'm trying to...”

“Maybe they are saying something on TV?”

“No, Mom, don't turn it on... Maybe... I...” Roman was about to suggest calling the police, but he wasn't sure if it was a right thing to do.

“Someone is shouting, they're calling me... I think it's Kolya.”

Uncle Kolya was their upstairs neighbor. He had known Roman since he was a little kid, always shaking his hand whenever the boy played around their building in Lviv.

“Don't open the door! Be quiet, mom, please! Is he trying... Umm... Jesus... Is he trying to break in, or... is he just knocking?”

“He's knocking really hard... And yelling...”

“Just... I don't know... Damn it... Just be quiet, mom, okay? Can you hide in the bathroom? Hide in the bathroom and lock yourself. And... Yes, go to the kitchen and get a knife, mom. Take it with you, you gotta have something... to... you know... To protect yourself, you gotta have something.”

“Oh God, oh God, oh God!”

“Mom! Please, listen to me, forget about this... Listen to me! Listen to what I'm telling you, please! Go to the kitchen and get a knife, if he breaks in, you gotta have some weapon with you! Something!”

“Okay... God... I'm gonna... Okay...”

“Do it, hurry...” Roman mumbled to himself, typing in *Twitter* with a trembling hand. Everything there was flooded with reports of murders.

Messages were in every language known to man, it seemed. Roman could only understand English, Ukrainian and Russian.

*God! What should I do? Am I talking too loud? Shit... Can they see the laptop?!*

He looked towards the window. Most of the apartments in the building opposite were now lit up. Screams and calamity were heard on the street. Roman turned away and stared at the laptop screen, holding the phone close to his face with his left hand. Palms sweated.

*Goddamn it, what should I do? What should I do?*

“Mom! Are you there? Did you take a knife?”

“Yes, I did. I'm in the bathroom...”

“Good... Did you lock the door?”

“I did.”

“Good... Is he still knocking?”

“Yes... God, Rom, someone is screaming in the house, I can hear it...”

“Damn it... Maybe you shouldn't sit there... No, no, sit there. Yeah... I mean, what else can you do? Call... Maybe call the police, okay? Call 102... It's 102, right? Yeah... Yeah, yeah, 102. And I'll call too, okay? And then I'll call you back right away. Tell them you need help urgently, okay? Tell them your address, okay? If they ask, then tell them... Yeah, call the police now, tell them you need help, okay?”

“Fine... I'll call.”

“Do it. I'm gonna call too... And then I'm gonna call you back, okay?”

Roman hung up.

*Maybe I shouldn't have done it... What if I won't be able to call her again? But then again, what... What can I do? Is there any point in calling the police? Damn, I assume everyone is calling now... God, what's happening? Are they some kind of terrorists or something? Is it some kind of... hypnosis or... what?*

He started dialing 102, but no one answered. Someone screamed outside the window. Roman shuddered. He decided to look out carefully, just a peek. He put the phone on the bed next to the laptop and crawled to the window.

An orange lantern was shining. Five feet from it, a young man got attacked by another one who started hitting him in the ribs with a small shiny knife. The attacked boy screamed and tried to fight back, but was obviously unprepared for something like this. He was just waving his hands and crying helplessly. When there was no fighting back and the boy just sunk to the ground, the killer straightened up and walked further down the street towards Roman's house. The phone rang. Roman crawled back to the bed. It was mom.

“Did they answer?”

“No...”

“Same...”

“Roma, they’re knocking harder...”

“There are more of them now?”

“No, I just... I’m hearing so many voices here. He is not alone, it seems. They are knocking very hard, like they’re trying to break in...”

“God... Mom, if they do it, just be quiet.”

“Oh God...”

“Mom, listen... They... If they break down the door, that means they... They know you're there, so... They’ll try to kill you, are you listening? You... You need to calm down and just... You need to calm down, don't cry, just don't cry. You gotta protect yourself, you understand?!”

“They’ve almost broken in...”

“Yes... I... I can hear it, even through the phone. You have the knife, right?”

“My God, God, save me, Lord...”

“Mom! Just shut up... Mom, I can't scream at you... You listening?”

“Yes.”

“They will pull the handle and realize that you have locked yourself in the bathroom. Then they will break down this door to get to you.”

“But why are they doing it?!”

“I don’t know.”

“But who are they? It’s Kolya, right? I can hear his voice...”

“Yes, I know, it’s... It’s probably him... They are just ordinary... They are ordinary people, I don't know why they’re doing it. The only thing... The most important thing now is to protect yourself!”

“But how?”

“When they break in... just... don't cry. Try to calm down, please. Try to... Try to hit them with the knife...”

And then Roman realized she wouldn’t be able to. Especially, if it wasn’t just uncle Kolya, if he had somebody with him. Mom would die. That thought made him sick.

“Goddamn it... Mom, you hear what I’m saying, right? Try to hit them and run away... Try to get out of the building, maybe... I don't know... No, no, it’s dangerous, don’t do that. Better just... Try to find an apartment, you know, maybe some place where...”

Roman was confused and didn’t really know what the right advice should be. Nothing remotely similar to that had ever happened in their lives.

“Mom, you... You have to survive... You have to survive... You have to fight. Try to calm down, can you hear me?”

“Oh, God.”

“What?!”

“They’re here, they’re in the apartment.” Lida lowered her voice.

“They’re gon... Mom, don't say anything, I can hear them. Hide your phone somewhere... Turn off the screen and hide it... Do you have a pocket?”

“Yes.”

“Don't talk. Maybe they won’t know you’re there... Maybe they’ll go away, maybe they won't break into the bathroom... Yes... Hide the phone. Listen! First... Try to attack first, strike first. They will try to grab you, hit you, you know... Try to hit them first, in the chest or in the face. Damn it... I’m... Strike them and then... Run! Hide your phone. Get the knife ready!”

Roman heard noises in his home apartment in Lviv. He could hear his mother putting her phone in the pocket. Then he heard a deep voice.

“Lida! Are you there?!”

A knock on the bathroom door. Roman recognized uncle Kolya's voice right away. Lida did not answer, she sat quietly.

"Lida, open the door, we have to run away from here, you hear me?! It's dangerous here, I'll help you."

Uncle Kolya started breaking the door down like there was a million dollars behind it. Time passed very slowly. Roman pressed the phone to his ear and shifted from foot to foot.

*Blyaha, don't listen to him, don't open it. Don't say anything... Maybe he'll... Maybe he'll go away...*

Then Roman heard the door wreck and a mother's scream. He heard her struggling and shouting, "Kolya, what are you doing?!" Sounds of struggle. And after that – a quiet rustle. Roman said nothing. The sounds were getting farther. Then everything quieted down.

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He sat on the phone for another ten minutes, hoping to hear at least something. But only distant screams and noise could be heard from the other side. They mixed with the shouts on the street and in the house. Somewhere someone was still fighting someone, trying to kill someone. Finally, Roman hung up. And immediately regretted doing it.

*She may still be alive. What if she was just waiting for them to leave to talk again?! Blyaha! And you can't call back. What if she doesn't have the ringer turned off, what if one of them is still there? What if he hears it and takes the phone away? And maybe check on her and find out she's not dead? It's gonna be your fault! Hell, maybe she was hoping I'd hang on the line... What a moron...*

Roman walked back and forth around the room, scolding himself.

*What can I do now? I can't call her, I... I'll put her in danger... Shit, she might still be alive...*

After standing still for a second, Roman knelt down in front of the bed and dived into Twitter again. There were already a whole bunch of videos where people filmed murderers running through the streets, chasing their victims, catching up with them and either just beating them to death with fists and feet, or with knives, stones or whatever was available to them.

Roman was nervously scrolling down. He could not imagine what was happening and why. How many people switched? How was this even possible?

*Why haven't I tried to kill anyone yet? Maybe I'll try? Maybe it's happening gradually? What if I just need to leave the building to start doing this? Maybe that's the point? Well, no, that's not right, they are doing it here, my neighbors. They started fighting at home, they didn't go anywhere. This is something else. Damn, what do I do? God...*

*Mom will call herself! Exactly! I can't do that, but she... she will! As soon as they leave and there will be no danger... She'll call me. She...*

It was unlikely, Roman understood it. Most probably, his mother was already dead. He remembered the people on the landing. The woman who was lying, covered in blood. The fight at the door for a minute or so. No, if they had sneaked into the bathroom, they must have done it. Mom was gone.

Roman thought he would cry now, but tears did not come. A disgusting numbness enveloped him, he sat down on the sofa and just stared at the wardrobe, trying to understand what was the right way to react, what he should do. Mom was the only one in his family he talked to. He also had a cousin, who also lived in Kyiv, but they just texted each other literally three times a year to wish happy birthdays and happy New Year. Grandma was still alive, on mother's side, but they also called each other about twice a year. She was very old.

*Are they still alive? Maybe I should call?*

Roman dialed his grandmother's number. She didn't pick up.

*Shit, does she turn off the sound at night or not? Maybe she just knows that no one will call her at night? Why do you not know that? Blyaha... Does she even know how to turn off the sound? Damn, I should have talked to her about it, I should have called her more often. And... What the hell is the difference? I can't help anyway. Not from here. Well, even if I was there, I wouldn't be able to help either...*

Thoughts were crowding up between the ears, but there was no sadness or despair. The heart was pounding. Roman did not feel any positive emotions



either. It would be quite surprising, given the situation.

Over time, only a feeling of emptiness in the chest appeared. Barely noticeable. And a big lump seemed to grow in his throat.

Roman sat and thought. And then he sat and thought some more. Then he called his granny again. And again, no one answered. Just like before.

*Maybe she's asleep and doesn't hear the ringing? Is it worth waking her up in this case? She cannot defend herself. What can I..? Should I tell her to go to the neighbors or what? Do I have the right to advise this shit? Here's what your neighbors can do to you! Damn... No, I can't. She locks herself at night, she... she locks the house. That I know for sure. In this case, whether I warn her or not, it will all be the same. No! If I tell her what's going on, she'll be more ready... But again, granny? More ready? She's not Uma Thurman. She's old and blind in one eye, what the hell is she gonna do? They will break down her door, just like they did to my mom... Why aren't they trying to break in here, to kill me? What's so special about this apartment? He is not alone there, for sure, it can't be. There was a fight in at least two apartments at the same time. There were probably a lot more, it's just that I didn't hear it. And still, they haven't come for me. Maybe they think that no one lives here? Seriously, this is the reason? It works like this? This is why I'm still alive? Well, yeah, it makes sense. Uncle Kolya knew mom was there. They only try to get into the apartment if they know that someone lives there. So, nobody knows I'm here... Blyaha...*

Roman closed the laptop and sat on the bed. He tried to listen. Waited for something new. Someone was making noise somewhere on the upper floors, but overall the building was much quieter. It was almost four in the morning, an hour had passed since the grand switch.

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At 4:12 AM, Roman opened his laptop again to check what some well known media, such as CNN, Fox News or Al Jazeera, were reporting.

*There should be something...*

Roman had never been interested in that stuff before.

He noticed the freshest Elon Musk's tweet: "I guess this is the end of the world?"

It pissed Roman off.

*What a freaking douchebag. People are dying, and that rich asshole is probably sitting in his giant mansion with a bag of popcorn.*

But then Roman thought he shouldn't judge anyone. Elon Musk hadn't started it, most probably. Everybody was in the same boat right now. The boat that was heading towards a giant waterfall. Each person reacted to that in a unique way, of course.

If Roman was a conspiracy theorist, he would probably think the vaccinated against Covid were killing the unvaccinated, but it didn't even occurred to him. That was exactly what his colleague from work assumed. Her name was Svitlana. She had previously refused to get a shot, because the secret world government was experimenting on people. She had another friend at work who hadn't done it because God didn't want her to. They both thought Roman was extremely rational for not getting vaccinated. The reason he hadn't done it was because no one particularly forced him to, so he didn't really care.

At 4:15 AM a message from Sveta popped up in the bottom of the screen. She texted in Telegram. It read: "Roma, are you alive?!"

Roman did not want to talk to anyone. He didn't care what his colleagues at work were doing. He was a rather polite person, though, so he replied, "Yes, thank you. Are you OK?"

That was a pretty stupid question considering the situation, but again, he wrote the first thing his mind had come up with, just for the sake of not ignoring her.

"You're alive! I knew it! I thought you'd be fine! What did I tell you? They must've put something in the vaccines!"

"Oh, Jesus Christ..." Roman mumbled to himself. The reason was, his mom was vaccinated. He entered the dialogue again and turned off the notifications from Sveta. Then he turned off all the notifications in Telegram. He was gradually coming to an understanding he was about to become a loner in a very shitty version of the world.

*Now I shouldn't give a damn about anybody. Mom's gone, there's only me I gotta take care of. They've probably killed granny too. Or they will in the*

*next few hours. I can't do anything about it. I'm here and I'm alone. That's a fact. My cousin... She and I never got along anyway. I'm on my own. I'm alone now. I gotta... What can I do?*

In the news, they wrote about attacks on power plants, warned it was happening everywhere in the world, reports came from every country on the map, it seemed. They warned people.

**We advice to charge all your devices, power banks, laptops, phones, as it is quite possible that power cuts will start in the near future due to the damages caused by unknown terrorists.**

To Roman, it seemed ridiculous to call them terrorists. Terrorists pursue political goals, demand something, but now random people were exterminating random people. At random.

*Maybe, there is someone behind the curtain. Someone who might've caused it... for whatever reasons. It's definitely not the vaccines, it didn't affect mom, it's something else. Damn, as if there's no other way to affect people. They could've even done it secretly had they wanted to. I mean, they know everything about everybody. Well, almost, but... They could've done it differently, I'm sure of it. What it is, then? Why am I not affected?*

Then he remembered Daniela.

*Is there any point in writing to anybody? I can't help them with words anyway. So what's the point? And maybe they're busy with something important, trying to survive, and I'll just distract them. I can't save anyone, I'm not sure if I can save myself. And I won't go out anyway. Not now, at least. I gotta stay here, while it's safe... I mean, it's safe, isn't it? Maybe they'll find someone, and try to escape, go somewhere... I don't know where. And I can't tell them not to do it, I mean, what do I know? I don't know shit... Yeah... You're alone, you've got to take care of yourself first. Somehow you're not affected by this shit, whatever it is. Gotta watch out. God knows what's happening outside... Gotta stay here. For now. What if they message me, ask me about something, like Sveta? Should I answer?*

Screams were heard again outside the window. It was still dark.

*There's nothing to say. I should just ignore them. They'll think I'm dead or I've started killing like those... What the hell should I call them?*

*Murderers? Well, yeah, this is what they are, I guess. You don't have any friends anymore, you shouldn't be interested in what they're doing. You shouldn't check Telegram at all... What should you do now?*

He looked at the battery icon at the bottom of the screen. 45%.

*Jeez, I gotta charge it...*

He picked up the laptop, closed it, ran to the kitchen and plugged the charger in. And then he just stood in his kitchen, rubbing one palm against the other.

*My sister hasn't called me. Maybe she was killed right away, too? Or she can be one of them... I mean, ordinary people get... turned. Maybe she did, too? I've known uncle Kolya my whole life. I never would've thought that he would kill my mom one day... One morning, I mean. So, these are ordinary people. Therefore, it can happen to anyone. Shit, Lera knows where I live.*

Lera was his cousin's name.

*Blyaha. Now she might come for me... Or bring other murderers with her...*

Something sinister was happening at one of the entrances of the building opposite.

There was a balcony behind the kitchen's big window, making it a bit difficult to view the street. So Roman returned to the room. The windows there overlooked the children's playground. In front of the building opposite, a couple of people ran towards the steps leading down to the highway and Interplaza. The steps that were constantly covered in spit and piss and vomit, which Roman climbed down or up when going to work or returning home.

The people were far from the orange lantern, so you couldn't see what they looked like.

*I wonder if they're killers? Or just survivors like me, trying to escape somewhere? Damn, where the hell are they going?! It's safer inside... I mean... Am I right?*

The dead lad was still lying face down on the asphalt in the orange light of the lantern. Roman checked the phone charge. 75 %.

*I still gotta charge it up, though. I mean, who know what's gonna happen next... Damn, I should've bought a power bank. But, I mean, I didn't expect that to happen, so... Yeah...*

Roman returned to the kitchen, put the phone on the charger, sat down in the chair, and tried to relax for the first time in the last hour and a half. His lips were dry. But he didn't want to drink that much.

*Only drink if you're really drained. God knows for how long you'll have to be here. You don't have that much water and food.*

All he had was a half-emptied bottle of mineral water and the two full ones, fresh out of the supermarket, lying in the bag by the front door. Usually, it would be enough for a week. Now it was obviously necessary to save the supplies for as long as he could.

*Should I search for some more news? Well, yeah, I outta be trying for as long as the Internet is working.*

Roman opened the laptop and checked the YouTube channels he was subscribed to. Nothing. No! Not nothing! There was something. Jake Wilson was streaming. He was an American political blogger and did a lot of debates about things that were important to some people. Mainly, to his audience. Roman put one earpiece into his left ear and clicked on the thumbnail. Jake was monologuing live and answering questions from his followers. From those who were still alive, obviously.

“Yeah, there have been reports of explosions in Washington. Well, yeah, it seems like it's a global disaster, caused by something... I don't know, it hasn't been confirmed by anyone yet. Something unknown. That's it... Can they break in? Yes, they can. I'm in my room, the door is locked. My parents have also locked themselves up. I repeat: please, tell your friends and family to do the same. This seems to be the only thing that is... umm... the only thing that is relevant right now... No, there really hasn't been any word from the authorities yet... From any authorities anywhere, yeah, that's really messed up... Oregon? I hope you're alright. How's it going?

Somebody is shooting outside... Yeah, it's the same thing here in LA...

Well, yeah, just be quiet and don't come out. If the police has been taken out and we're left without law enforcement, that's pretty much the end of it.

Since the media is still functioning, but there's no word from the authorities,

then... I really don't know what to think, I don't want to jump to any conclusions and scare people, but, well, you all have to understand that there is a possibility that we will all be alone with this chaos in the near future, and there will be no means of communication. You need to be prepared. If you have a weapon, then just save it, save the ammo. Jesus, I can't believe I'm actually saying this on Youtube, but... yeah. It's better to hide, you should only shoot if there's a real threat to your life. Don't just waste it all. You gotta keep that in mind. No, nobody's said anything about evacuation. I guess nobody's doing it. Or maybe somebody is, but... there's no way to check. Umm... Yeah, no one does anything, there are murderers running around in the streets, killing people, and all the media are just saying there are murderers killing people in the streets. Oh, yeah, they also advice to charge our phones. That's it."

Without turning off the stream, Roman entered Telegram. The eyelids were getting heavier. In the Telegram channel about Kyiv, there were messages about gunshots heard on Khreshchatyk and Troyeshchina. Roman checked the comments under the post. Turned out there were many people like him who had simply locked themselves at home and did not come out. No one commented while on the road. There were many comments from the same accounts. Even at such a difficult time, a lot of people were arguing with each other. Someone was talking about the vaccines, like Sveta. Nothing interesting. Nothing important. Nothing new. Roman closed the Telegram window, but then opened it again. He saw a message from Misha, the friend who studied abroad. Without entering the dialogue window, Roman could only see the last message. It was three question marks.

*Jesus Christ, why are you so dramatic?*

Then his school friend from Lviv texted. And then he called. Roman ignored, did not pick up.

*I'm alone now, I don't need anyone. They're just getting in the way. I can't help anyone, no one can help me. Just a waste of time.*

Then he childishly deleted everyone from his contact book and changed the settings, only allowing his contacts to call him.

*That's it, now it won't happen.*

No one else texted. Sister hadn't written him anything.

*I guess she's gone. Or she just doesn't care... Whatever...*

Apparently, she was no longer alive... Roman was dozing off. Then he remembered that the equipment was still charging.

*If I fall asleep and the electricity goes out, the laptop will begin to discharge. I better turn it off for now.*

So he did. Then he leaned back in the chair and fell asleep.

### 3

When he woke up, it was already dawn. The first day after the grand switch had come. Outside the window, murky clouds hung above the gray building opposite. At first glance, there were no people there in any window. Roman checked the laptop. A little white light signaled the device had been charged up fully. There was still electricity.

*Could I dream it all?*

He reached for the phone.

*No, I really called mom last night. Blyaha...*

So, mom died. For real. She hadn't called him since. Her phone was probably still in her pocket. Or maybe it had fallen on the floor. It didn't really matter.

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He stood up, once again expecting tears to flow. But they didn't come. There was only numbness. As if he had become a soulless camera that was now watching his house burning down with his family inside.

Everything turned into some kind of a fiction movie. Could it be so? There had never been anything like that. At least he couldn't recall reading about anything like that in history books. People, of course, had killed each other, sometimes in a much worse way than just stabbing chests and backs or crushing skulls with stones. Much worse. But such random mass murdering shit storm had never happened before, Roman was sure about that.

*And it just had to happen to my generation. Blyaha, my luck! What if it's some kind of a foolery? Maybe the whole world has conspired to play me? Well, it could've happened to Elon freaking Musk, but who the hell am I? Just some idiot from Ukraine. Yeah, yeah, that freaking Fincher's movie, 'The Game'. I gotta run to the roof and mommy will be waiting for me there*



*with a bottle of champagne. Nah. I guess that's it right now. It really happened. Last night. Jesus... I am by myself now. I am alone now.*

He repeated, thinking that would definitely make him burst in tears. But they still did not flow.

*This is not okay. What the hell is wrong with me? Okay... It's not what I should be thinking about right now. What am I... What do I have? I should go brush my teeth... No... I can't use tap water, it might already be poisoned by something. I don't know... What do I know? Unless I boil it, maybe? Will it help? Is there gas?*

The apartment had a gas stove, not an electric one. Roman turned a handle hoping to see blue fire. But there was no blue fire. There was no fire at all.

*Well... Here we go! I should've rented that apartment on Demiivska... It had an electric stove. And what should I do now? Maybe one of my neighbors has one? If no, then I can't boil anything, basically. Or what, just make a fire? Maybe I should. But I don't know how to do it, I've never done it. Oh, by the way, is there Internet?*

Roman turned on the laptop. There was no cable Internet. Then he checked the mobile. The same thing.

*Blyaha. Welcome to the brand new world, you stupid asshole.*

It was not possible to call anyone anymore, it was not possible to read news anymore. And it was not possible anymore to google how to start a fire in a building without burning it down.

*Why do I need a laptop now? Or a phone? It's all useless.*

But then he remembered there was a fapping folder with a lot of porn and a music folder with a lot of music on the laptop.

*Well, yeah, okay, I guess they're not completely useless. Is there water?*

There was only cold water.

*I can't use it, though. No. Bad idea. So what do I do?*

Roman returned to the kitchen and closed the laptop. Then he thought it didn't really matter, it still worked from the outlet, there was still electricity, so he opened it again. Then he sat down in the chair, resting his elbow on the table. The day was gray and quiet.

*I can't turn on anything loudly. So what do I have here?*

The fapping folder contained 256 photos of models, the girls from his university, and screenshots from Pornhub and Xvideos.

Roman smiled for the first time since the grand switch.

*Well, I'm still here, I guess. I mean, I don't think there's anything wrong with that, you can jerk off.*

But he didn't want to masturbate at all. Roman flipped through the pictures, but there was no movement in his pants.

*Blyaha, what am I thinking about? Jesus...*

He closed the fapping folder and opened up the music folder. There were many beautiful things there. Every time Roman had come across some cool song or a decent remix on YouTube, he immediately downloaded the audio and put into folder. There were 654 mp3 files. Roman plugged in his left earbud and played Odd Nosdam's 'Trish'.

*As long as the battery has power, the computer will work. The phone too. But there is not much use for them now... I don't want to eat yet... There is no gas, so I can't cook macaroni. Damn it. Again, unless I somehow start a fire here, but I have no idea how... Gotta think. Shit... How can this be done safely? Blyaha... Well, for now, I don't want to do it. And also, I've got the veggies. My only food. No, there's the bread. And the chips, of course! I gotta wash the vegetables, right? No, I won't do anything with this water. Maybe, flush the toilet, but that's it. Oh, I have wet wipes! That's your solution. You can wipe the vegetables with them and everything will be fine. And you can wipe your hands with them too, after the bathroom, for example. Oh, God, I hope I don't need to poop soon. That would be terrible. But I will need to sooner or later anyway. I mean, unless I kill myself. That's an option. Okay, I can flush shit as long as there is water. And when there is no water, I will flush it once and then... maybe move to a different apartment? That's an option. I gotta check if the water still runs before flushing. Wait, why the hell do I need to flush if I just take a leak? Nah, no need to. Blyaha, I don't even know how this system works. And I won't google anything anymore. Hell. I wonder when water stops running... That would be so good to know, actually. But I don't know anything about it. God... I forgot how good this song was...*

Roman listened to the end and went to take a piss. He tried to not make any noise.

*Everything is allowed now, basically. You can take other people's property... There are no laws anymore... Well, I mean, only the abandoned things, of course. Actually, the biggest problem right now is I don't know how many people like me are left. Are there still someone somewhere in the building? There was a lot of noise last night, is anyone left? I can't be the only one, right? Or maybe I can... I can't possibly know. People either locked themselves in their homes, like I did, or tried to get away... But where can you go? Even if you find some kind of a shelter, like the subway or something... Oh, Jesus! If everyone is dead, I can walk around the city alone. That would be so cool! But, of course, I can't be the last one in Kyiv. Therefore, it's very dangerous. I gotta wait. But for how long? I don't know.*

Roman reached for the flush button, but stopped right in time.

*That was close. Shouldn't do it. Okay, should I wipe my hands or not? I guess it's irrelevant now. I mean, I only touched my dick and I'm not gonna eat, so... I'll take the risk. It would be hilarious if I didn't wash my hands and then died because of it. Sad, yet funny. After surviving the apocalypse. Yeah, it would be funny. No, of course, it's not funny at all, but...*

*Blyaha! They can hear me flushing! Right! This is how you know if there's someone in the building.*

Roman returned to the kitchen and closed the laptop. It felt a little uncomfortable to walk around with unwashed hands after using the toilet.

*I'll get used to it. A person gets used to everything.*

He then went into the room. He continued walking with bare feet. The skin was cold as ice. He opened the wardrobe, took a pair of socks out of the drawer, sat on the bed and pulled them on. He was still in the undies and the pink t-shirt he had slept in. He changed into his usual home clothes.

*I wonder if they are able to hear me walking here? Well, I hope not. Maybe I should walk on my toes... All the time?! Nah, better just kill me already, I won't do this shit. Although... No, I mean, I can't treat it like this. I gotta be careful... Why the hell haven't I started killing people? Is God saving me? No, there is no God. Mom did not start killing either, but she was killed*

*right away. It's just a bit of luck, that's it. No one knows I live here, otherwise they would've knocked the door down and killed me. Good thing I've always avoided my neighbors! Well, blyaha, done, Roma!*

He went up to the window, hunching over so that no one could notice him. Now there was more than one corpse in between the two buildings. The boy was still lying face down on the asphalt where he had been stabbed. Two women lay by the building opposite, right by the door of one of the entrances. By the door of another entrance lay a child and a man.

“Good Lord...” Roman whispered to himself, carefully moving away the caramel curtain.

There were no corpses on the playground. But there were a lot around it.

*One, two, three, four... yes, the fifth is around the corner, hard to see who it is, but he's... he's there. Or is it a woman? Jesus, imagine how many of them are just scattered all over the city!*

*I see no living. And where are all the murderers? No sign of them, too. They ran away... But where? What is the power that drives them? Maybe this is some kind of a collective hypnosis? Some guru told them to kill people on sight? And then do what? When they kill everyone, then what? Maybe they've been told to, like, go somewhere afterwards, and also kill everyone who happens to be on their way? Damn it, blyaha. But why are they knocking then?*

*To kill those they know! Maybe that's what it is, really. Kill everyone you know and then go... somewhere... But if that's true, they must've already gotten far away from here. Or maybe there is no such place they've gotta go to, maybe they are still wandering here somewhere, I just don't see them. It's possible, I can't look in all directions, windows don't work like that... Well, yeah, that's unfortunate. I haven't seen shit, really.*

The stomach grumbled.

*Stop it, you're not that hungry... But I better have a little snack in the evening, I don't know what. Maybe open the chips, eat some, drink some water. The hell with the balanced diet, we've never got along anyway...*

Roman smiled.

*What if I'm really the last okay guy on Earth? No, that's impossible. There should be at least people like me somewhere, those in hiding. I can be the last one in this building, that's more believable. But I can't be sure about it. Definitely not the last one in Kyiv. It would make sense to contact other survivors, but how? Damn, you can somehow communicate through the radio... I've seen them do it in 'The Walking Dead'. But I'm dumb as a parrot, I don't know anything about anything. Why the hell did I survive? I'll die the moment I walk out of the building... It would've been a lot better if someone with the knowledge had survived instead of me. Well... No, now that I think about it, it would've not been good for me. But for the other person it would've, for sure. Like the boy under the lantern... Maybe he knew how to communicate through the radio. But he definitely didn't know you shouldn't be walking in the streets of Kyiv at night. I mean... That thing is a lot simpler to understand than radio communication, I assume. Maybe it's not for some people... Jesus... What are you thinking about, you worthless moron! Okay, okay... There has to be some explanation to all of this. Has to be. But... Nah, It doesn't matter to me anyway... I guess... I mean, I won't know it anyway. No way... Or maybe I will someday... Okay, what do I do now?*

Roman moved away from the window and returned to the kitchen. He sat down in the chair again. There was really nothing to do. He decided not to eat for now. It was scary to leave the apartment. Roman just sat for some time, staring at the old green wallpaper and the central heating pipe that ran from the ceiling to the floor.

He'd often done so even before the grand switch. Just sitting and staring at something, as if hypnotized. Remember how Arnold stood all night staring outside the window in the second terminator movie? Roman had been able to sit like that for a whole hour, until some thought or a call from mom pulled him out of this robotic stupor.

It was like that now. The difference was he had no chores to do, no plans to make. The job, salary twice a month, calling mom twice a day, friendly chatting with Daniela – it was all gone. The only thing that was reminding Roman he was still in this reality and still alive was his stomach that growled from time to time.

## 4

*I must be a bad person. My whole family died and I haven't cried once. Someone else would still be sobbing... Maybe it's a defense mechanism. Maybe my brain understands that now I need to survive, no time for grieving. But how can I survive? What the hell am I supposed to do? I will not go outside.*

*What if they nuke us? Nuke Kyiv? Then what? Well, that will be the end for me... But why us? I mean, it's everywhere, right? Was there a place where it started and then spread all over the world? Like a virus. Like Covid... Maybe, China? Were there reports from China on Twitter? I can't remember... I didn't think about it at the time... It really is like a mass hypnosis. Damn...*

*Okay, I'm in Kyiv, so I guess Russia can nuke us. I mean, they've threatened with this shit a lot. Who knows who controls their weapons now... What if Putin is dead? It would be cool, actually. But ours are probably dead too... It's possible.*

*Jake said there was no word from the authorities. Perhaps, this thing, whatever it is, first hit all the heads of states? Like, everybody at the same time? So that there is no supervision anywhere, nothing? If that's the case, then it really is some sort of a terrorist attack, but against whom specifically? And who is behind it? And how the hell does it work? God... How do I know? I can't think of any possible explanation to this... I better just think about something else...*

*No internet. Blyaha... What can be done now? I mean, Lera might still be alive. But she lives too far. She won't come here, no reason. She has her own friends, I haven't even talked to her in like... How long? Six months?*

*Roman grabbed the phone and opened the dialogue with Lera. He could still see some information and messages, even without Internet.*

*Yeah... In March. On her birthday. If she survives, she'll look for some of her friends, if she can, and not me. Therefore, I am here alone... And if she turns and starts hunting too, can she get here? She rents an apartment at Vokzalna... Damn, how far is it from me? I'm sure buses don't run now, so if she's planning to come here and kill me... If the theory about them killing people they know is true...*

*Were those dudes friends? Possibly. Maybe they were walking together at night, and then suddenly one attacked the other? It could be what happened. I mean, I don't know. Let's stick to this theory at least for now.*

*Okay... She has a bunch of friends. Therefore, first she will go... Damn, it would be so funny if subway still worked!*

*Roman laughed.*

*Well, Roma, you're still laughing at stupid shit, so you're still here. Right... But the fact that I'm laughing and haven't cried a bit is messed up, isn't it? Whatever.*

*So, she'll go to her friends first, screw me. And if she decides to go for me, it is quite possible that something could happen to her on the way. I mean, right now, there's a ton of crazy shit going on in the streets. Probably... Damn, I'm not even sure about that. But it would be logical, right?*

*And how do murderers communicate with each other? How do they know who should be killed, and who's, like, one of them? No clue. Or maybe they're just killing everyone they see chaotically? If they are able to spot each other, then... But how? Well, maybe, it's pretty simple, I mean, if the dude is running after somebody with a knife, then he's one of us... But regular people also kill other people... If they can't spot each other, then Lera can potentially be taken out by another murderer...*

*Oh, come on, relax, she won't come! She will probably attack her neighbors first. Or the girl she lives with! Exactly, I haven't thought of that! Tanya! If one of them turns, then one will attack the other. And maybe in this fight they both will die. So, I probably shouldn't worry, right? Yeah...*

*Definitely... But what if they both turn? I don't know... If they don't recognize their own, then the two potentially will attack each other anyway. And if they do recognize their own, then... Damn...*

*Maybe this is really a very vivid bad dream? Doesn't look like a dream. Everything is too real. In any case, I think my sister will have to go through a lot to get here granted she's alive. Plus, first she will attack those who are closer to her. The roommate, or other neighbors. She knows a lot of people... Yeah, I shouldn't worry. And what if she's not one of them and she comes here? I won't be able to tell if she really is who she says she is. Well, I mean, if she tries to break in, then...*

*If she gets this far, it's already suspicious. If they do communicate with each other, then other murderers won't harm her. And she'll be able to come here and attack. And she might come with her 'new friends' too. Bring other murderers to me. Damn... I shouldn't have rented her friend's apartment. I think she even mentioned having been here. Damn it. She knows my location. It's bad. Really bad. Why the hell did I ask for her help? I should've chosen a different apartment. And if she comes, she won't back down if I don't open it. She will understand that I am here, that I've just closed the door and hidden inside. Maybe it's better to move somewhere else? Which is less risky?*

Roman returned to the room, crawled to the window again and looked out. There were no people outside. Alive people, I mean. The position of the corpses had not changed. There was no movement anywhere. Coming to his senses, Roman looked at the building opposite.

*Oh, shit, why didn't I think about it before?!*

He ran his eyes over the windows, trying to spot a movement, a face, something.

*If someone is there right now, it's most likely not a murderer. It's a person who, like me, has hidden, and now is waiting for... something.*

But the 9-storey Soviet building was gray and lifeless. Even more than before the grand switch.

*They might be cautious. Hiding in rooms or bathrooms. Anywhere. If there are people, can they be murderers? I can't trust anyone. I can't take risks. Jesus, why wasn't I turned? Does God need me for something? Well, look, God, if you do, then it's about time you start answering people. You can't say there are too many prayers now, there aren't many of us left... No... No*



*one needs me, it's just a funny coincidence. Don't search for anything supernatural in this...*

*But I need to protect myself. Can't trust anyone... Remember uncle Kolya... For now, just hide here. For awhile. And when the food runs out, what then? I'll have to go out. I mean, I can't just sit and die slowly, can I? That would be insane, Jesus.*

*Fora will probably be looted by survivors. If it hasn't been yet. Do murderers eat at all? What are they gonna do after they... after they kill everyone? Well, they need to eat too, right? They haven't become robots, they're still humans... probably. In the streets, they have nothing to fear. And if they communicate with each other, then they can simply move together, in groups. That would be logical. Or how does it work? I don't know... Soon, there's not gonna be any food in Fora, that's for sure.*

*It would be cool to go to Ocean Plaza. Maybe they've even organized some sort of shelter there... No, it can't be. It all happened so suddenly. They didn't have time for that. Or maybe there is a shelter, but for those who've caused it all. But I'm sure if there are people like that, some secret governors of the world, they are definitely not from Ukraine. And they sure as hell won't be hiding in Ocean Plaza. It is now a home for murderers, I guess. Or for those in hiding. I can't trust either. And also, it's a long way to Plaza. In the past life it was right across the highway, five minutes and you're there, eating at MacDonalds. But now it's a long and dangerous road. I won't take it, not now, at least.*

*It's better to just stay here. But really, what about food? I'll run out of it soon. I'll have to leave the building. Or steal from neighbors. A lot of doors are probably unlocked now. You think there are murderers in the building? Maybe. Where did that dude go? He limped down the stairs, did he die or what? Maybe he's still searching for survivors. Maybe he will knock on my door sooner or later, what will I do then?*

*Roman sat down on the bed. He looked at the caramel curtains, then at the closet, then at the walls. His stomach rumbled again.*

*He's already fought with the neighbors, there was even a man shouting, so the guy is injured, I assume... First of all, I won't open the door for him, and he definitely doesn't know if anyone lives here. I hope so... Maybe he*

will knock... He will probably play a different role, pretend to be injured, say that he is scared, ask for help. Like Alex DeLarge.

Will he try to break in? A broken front door is a serious problem. It's always been, but now it would be worse than ever. What should I do if he starts knocking? So far, it's been quiet out there. But if he starts breaking down the door, someone else might hear, some other murderer, and come creeping in here, and then I... I don't stand a chance. I mean, I'm not sure if I can take out that one most probably wounded old dude. Blyaha, I've never even fought in my life, not once... I know nothing about beating the crap out of people. God... No, let's be logical. If he hasn't knocked yet... How much time has passed, anyway? Since the beginning... Already... Yeah, about four hours. He must have injured himself when he was killing these... people. The woman on the floor and... there was a man also. So he just... He either went somewhere else or died. He was going down very slowly, I remember. Yes, he must have died already. Can it be that they only kill people they were familiar with before all of this... apocalyptic shit? Do they attack strangers? Actually, it would be kinda silly if they didn't. I mean, only those whom they know personally?! That would be ridiculous. They must be attacking everyone. Yeah, that sounds right.

Roman went to the front door. It was quiet outside.

Yeah, he must've died. Or wandered elsewhere to kill someone else. What was I thinking about? I forgot... Something important, damn it! Ah, yeah. Neighbors must have a lot of food. Altogether, it will keep me for weeks, probably. But if that's the case, then... Someone else could have got the stuff, for example, when I was sleeping in the kitchen. Some marauders. There are marauders for sure. What do you think there won't be? There are always bastards willing to take things that don't belong to them...

Well, I mean, I'm planning to do the same, so... Yeah. Idiot. I mean, I guess it's safe to say you can forget all the past rules. I gotta search through every single apartment, if necessary. I gotta be here as long as I can. If I go to Fora or some other store, I'll probably meet someone. I don't want to. I mean, even before I didn't like to be around people. Even survivors like me – they can turn later. They're dangerous too. I don't know how it works, so I can't be sure. Can't trust anyone. I am alone, it cannot be otherwise.

*Is there a point in such life? Living without people, living in fear... Like, I'm gonna die sooner or later, anyway.*

Roman went to the kitchen and sat down in the chair again. For the first time since the grand switch he seriously considered taking his own life.

*If I'm correct and they can turn later, then I can turn too. And then I can hurt someone. Perhaps, it would be better to end it all here and now, and that's it. Right? I mean, how do you live in such a wicked world? It's not life... First of all, I'm not Rick Grimes, I can't survive, hunt for food, nothing. I'm clumsy and stupid and... I didn't find myself in the previous life, what are the chances it will be different in this one? Nah, it won't work at all. What will I do? I've never even been in a fight. Suppose someone attacks me. I can either run or... just die. It's better to do it yourself now, when you are still you. I'll come up with something... Something painless... I can... I can slit my wrists. Get into the bath, like they do in movies. In that case, it won't matter whether the water is poisoned or not, if I... Well, yeah. But, on the other hand, that so-called meaningful life – did I have it before? Well, I worked in the office, I was not very social, that's for sure. I got paid. Twice a month! That's something, right? Enough money to pay my rent and buy some food. I've never really enjoyed being around people. I mean, we talked with Daniela, but still, it was just a workplace friendship. We just talked about music and... like... She liked 'My Neighbor Totoro'.*

*You got any movies on your laptop? I mean, I gotta save the battery, but... Will I ever really need it for some saving-my-life kind of stuff? There's no electricity and there's no Internet. I might as well use it all for something good and fun. Like jerking off... No, I still don't want to.*

*Music! I have a lot of music on my phone and my laptop. And when they're gone, I won't be able to listen to it anymore. Maybe do it now while it's all working still? This is... not a bad idea, actually. I mean, what the hell! Might as well do this. Is it wise to wear earphones, though?*

Roman pricked up his ears. The house seemed to be quiet. No one shouted on the street either. It was a bit weird, actually. On the first day you'd expect a lot more. Also, not once had Roman heard someone flush a toilet.

*Well, if they come, I'll hear, I think. Just don't listen at full volume, that's all. And... I mean, even if you hear them breaking in, what can you do?*

*Fight? And whom? If there more than one, I'm done. I can just go into the room and... Pray! I think in my case it would be a lot more pragmatic than trying to fight back. What room is the safest if that happens? Well... The bedroom is the biggest one, in the kitchen I'm kinda isolated, I guess. But they will get me everywhere if they want... They are still human. They speak like ordinary people. I heard them talk. At first, they try to talk you into letting them in. Uncle Kolya called mom by name. Yeah! I haven't thought about it! That is, they remember who they are. They have their memory. But then, how is this possible? What is happening to them? How do you switch like that? If you are still you.*

Roman opened up the laptop, went to the music folder and started scrolling through the list up and down.

*So many good songs. I'll forget about them when the laptop fades. Time will wash them away. I can't keep the full list in my head.*

*Six hundred files... Outta boy, Roman. At least you won't download music illegally from now on. The one crime I'll never ever commit again for sure.*

And then he came up with a wonderful idea.

*I should write down the names of my favorite songs on a piece of paper. I know how they sound, I've listened to them a thousand times. But I gotta have the reference in front of me, just in case the song itself slips out of my head. The paper is now more durable than the computer.*

Roman had a notebook on the table in the kitchen. Before the grand switch, he had sometimes watched historical lectures to become smarter. It was full of dates, definitions, all that seemingly very important educational stuff that now had no practical purpose at all.

But music was still important. To Roman, at least. The music had to be preserved in some way. It should not be lost. He didn't really want to listen to anything at the time, for he could miss a knock or a scream because of that. Also, there was no mood for music. But the list had to be created for later, so he took the earphones, put in only the left one at the start, took a pen and began to write down the titles of the songs he loved most.

*What do we have here? Oh, 'The Wall' by Fruit Machine! Definitely. What a great song!*

He turned it on, listened from beginning to end. Sometimes he put in the second earpiece too, only for a minute, then took it out. No one was breaking in anyway. The laptop was slowly losing charge.

Roman wrote down the names of several Joni Mitchell songs: 'You Turn Me On I'm A Radio', 'Electricity', 'All I Want' and 'Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire'; three of his favorite tracks from the English electronic duo Bent's debut album: 'I Remember Johnny', 'A Ribbon For My Hair' and 'I Love My Man'.

He listened to all the tracks he "documented" in the notebook, in order to remember them better.

*Damn. 'Exile' by Enya. It's from that movie with Steve Martin, which I haven't freaking watched. Blyaha, I was planning to watch it on the New Year's eve. I won't now... Goddamn apocalypse! I wonder if Daniela has seen it...*

Roman put the song on the list, it was great. Also by Enya, he chose 'Orinoco Flow', 'Watermark', 'Caribbean Blue' and 'Aldebaran'. The laptop was gradually losing charge, it was already at 67%. Roman did not care. He became so involved in creating the list that he didn't care at all what was happening around him. He even put in the second earbud and was listening at the volume he had usually listened music at. For a little while, he stopped caring about the apocalypse and about his plans for the future. He just listened to his favorite songs.

*Seefeel. Well, no, I won't be able to recreate their music... Maybe 'Signals'. This one I know pretty well. Yeah... Oh, and that one thing they played at John Peel session! Umm... What was it called, damn it! It's gotta be somewhere in the folder, I remember downloading it illegally from Youtube... What the hell! Can't find it... Well... Okay, then just write 'that thing from John Peel session'. You remember the melody pretty well, you just gotta have the reference, that's it. Will do. What about the Beatles? I think I know all of their songs by heart. Just write down the ones you can forget exist. Like... Prum-prum-prum... 'Blue Jay Way'! Yes, I can forget about this one, and it's a good one. Oh, also, write down that one... Oh, how could you forget the name, it's probably your favorite song by them. 'Across The Universe'! That's it! How much is left? Damn, 55%.*

*What else? You need something shoegazey. For sure.*

*Oh! 'Flaming' by Pink Floyd, gotta write that one down. And 'Pow R. Toc. H'. Should also put something by Syd Barrett. Damn, I won't be able to listen to this one radio riff of his anymore... Oh... Damn it! I hope I won't forget the melody, God, such a beautiful melody! What was it called?! Boogie... something... Oh, here it is!*

He wrote down: 'Syd Barrett boggie 2 radio guitar'.

Roman listened to Syd Barrett's recording ten times for it to stick well in his memory. It was short, the guitar opening was the most important for him.

Aphex Twin, Boards of Canada, Mike Paradinas. Roman knew all of their tracks by heart. He'd even tried to record covers in his program sometimes. He liked it.

He finished the list with several Lush tracks, A. R. Kane's track 'Spermwhale Trip Over' and all the known tracks of the American shoegaze band Ozean. There were only three.

The laptop had three percent left to live, Roman turned on a sped up version of 'Rhubarb', which he had recently downloaded from YouTube. Just three days before. He closed his eyes and, leaning back in his chair, listened until the screen went blank and there was silence.

But hey, he still had his phone at full charge. The clock on it showed 11:13 in the morning.

*What am I supposed to do now? Bye bye, laptop. Damn, now I've lost my porn... There's still something on my phone. In case... In case I get really really horny.*

He chuckled.

*I don't think it's gonna happen soon. Hey, no one broke in. I shouldn't have worried. Well, no, don't be stupid, you should constantly worry about it. How about the chips? No, save them for later.*

The stomach was relentlessly praying to Roman. Unlike God, Roman actually heard.

*Damn it, shut up! I can't do it now, you know I can't. I don't know when I'll be able to get out of here.*

It was cloudy outside.

*Shit, it would be so cool if it rained. I love rain. It would be nice if they nuked the city now. All the problems gone. In just a second. Hunger won't bother me anymore.*

Roman threw his head back again and stared at the white ceiling.

# 5

At 1:13 PM, Roman woke up from a noise on the stairs. Someone was rummaging behind the door, talking. Roman panicked. First he got up from the chair and stood in the kitchen, then he moved towards the door to listen. Laughter and men's voices could be heard on the stairs.

“God, I’ve always wanted to have sex with this chick.”

“Well, you can still eat a meal when it’s cold...”

“Ew, go to hell!”

“They gotta have something.”

“Yeah... Jesus, their child is dead, oh my God!”

*Seems like these aren’t murderers. But you can’t go out anyway. I mean, I have no idea who these people are.*

Roman was standing five feet from the front door, worried they would hear him if he came closer.

*Damn it, they’ll take all the food... They won’t share it with me, even if I go out.*

Roman believed that he did not get along well with people in general. Also, how do you start a conversation with the folks you don’t know in the apocalypse? And would they even talk to him? Maybe they would just kill him. Or rape him. Or burn him alive. It could be anything, really.

Their voices were rough. Reminded him of high school, where people with such rough voices picked on him pretty often. The kind of people who throw your stuff into a garbage can to just laugh at your reaction. If those two were like that, Roman couldn’t possibly get along with them. Maybe at the beginning, but not for long. Differences would soon become obvious and he would find himself close to a potential threat.



*They're not murderers, yet, they can still be bad people, right? I mean, now there's no government, no laws, no rules except for the ones you make up for yourself. So just be quiet.*

Roman was standing by the bathroom door. He heard how the boys entered the neighbors' apartment. They made a lot of noise.

*How are they not afraid? Murderers can hear them. Or maybe they know something I don't? Or maybe they are murderers, they just don't know I'm here, so they don't try to break in? No, no, they're not murderers, the way they talked about the child... But they can become ones. I don't know how it works. And then they will be a threat. It is better to stay alone. Damn... It sucks I'm not alone in the house. It's very bad. Now I'll have to keep that in mind if I go out. And how to get out now? I am now locked in this apartment. If I decide to go and check some apartment, there is a chance that I'll either bump into them, or they will have already taken all the supplies from there. I will return with nothing. And if I encounter them, they might kill me. Yes, they are... I don't know what they are, I don't read minds. Damn, it would be so cool to read minds.*

Roman stood with his right hand fingers wrapped around the handle of the bathroom door. They quickly sweated and at some point the hand just slipped.

*Goddamn it!*

The heart was beating hard. Roman was extremely worried they might try to get into his apartment.

*No, if they find everything they need elsewhere... Wait, why did they come here? That means they live somewhere nearby, doesn't it? Or is it the nearest unlocked apartment? Wait, how many apartments in the building are still locked? Maybe a lot of people have locked the doors and are just sitting inside, like me? Or what? But since they're moving around so freely, they must know for sure the building is safe. But how can they be sure of it? Here I am, for example, I could jump out at them any second and kill one or two. I mean, I'm not dangerous, but I could be. It's very simple to understand, they can't just ignore the possibility... Yet, they aren't hiding their presence at all. Maybe they are morons? Why the hell are they walking around so freely, don't they see what's going on? Maybe they are armed?*

*Damn... I am unarmed, that is, if I go out, I will be in their power. They can just take everything I have... Yeah, my two bottles of Morshynska, and also the cucumbers, the bread and the tomatoes...*

Roman giggled.

*Jesus, how am I laughing still?*

*The fact is I won't be able to do anything to them, but they can beat me to death. Moreover, there are two of them, even if all they've got are knives and sticks. They must have some heavy weapon, since they walk around so nonchalantly. Yes, they are dangerous for sure. Don't make any noise while they're around. What if they break in here? Well, if you think about it logically, then they don't really need to... I mean, if a bunch of apartments are open, they can just come in and take whatever they want from there. Unless their goal is to completely clear the house, make sure there's no one left except for them... Shit, in this case, they will try to break in.*

The boys continued to move around behind the wall. Roman could not make out exactly what they were saying.

*If they try to break in... I mean, if they break in, you have to protect yourself with something. Good thing they don't know anything about this apartment... I hope so, I hope they're not my landlord's friends. Probably not. That would be terrible. But... No, let's assume they are not. Then they don't even know if anyone lives here. It's quite possible... It's quite possible that it's just an empty apartment, or the owner went somewhere without renting it to anybody, or some other bullshit. Well, yes, it is quite possible. Therefore, they do not know what might wait for them here. If they break in, I'll be able to catch them by surprise. This is a plus. But I ain't got any weapon.*

Roman remembered the last conversation with his mother. He went to the kitchen on his tiptoes and very slowly and carefully grabbed a kitchen knife. It was not sharpened, but Roman thought it was more or less suitable for stabbing people to death. The problem was he had no idea how to stab people to death with a knife. They definitely didn't teach that at school or university.

*I guess I should aim for the chest. Will I be able to? Or just... in the face... And what about the second one? If I attack one of them, he will still have*

*time to tackle me. Even if I hit him. Even if the wound is fatal. He will not die immediately. Like a TV turning off...*

Roman giggled again.

*Even if he does die right away, there's still the second one. Right...*

*Attacking them is not an option... I can't handle two men... Are there really two of them? Well, I've heard two, so... Maybe the third one didn't say anything? There might be even more. You're complaining about it being a dp, but it might very well turn out to be a gang bang. Maybe they are not from here at all? No, they are, the way they were talking about having sex with that woman's corpse... If that's what they meant.*

*I wonder what floor they're from? What the hell is the difference? If I haven't heard them until now, they must live quite far away. Or how does it work? And if I go out, they will hear it and go down or up to catch me. In less than a minute. Or maybe they'll be afraid I'm armed? But, again, if they are now walking, talking, making noises, as if they're alone in the whole world... So, they must have good weapons. Yes, they must have something to protect themselves. Therefore, they have something to attack with. Attack me. In that case, if they don't break in now... it's still not safe for me to stay here. They can try to break in later. And again, I can't handle both. Or how many are there? It doesn't matter. For if they hear a noise, they'll go to check together, and then I'm... I'm done. I gotta get out of here as soon as possible.*

Roman was still standing in the kitchen when he heard someone pull the handle of his apartment's front door. With the knife in his hand, he froze in place. Voices were heard outside the door. Just like before, Roman tiptoed closer, to hear what was being said. But not close enough for them to hear that someone was inside. He crouched by the bathroom door, clutching the knife in both hands.

"It's quiet."

"Do you remember who lives here?"

There were definitely two of them. But others could be waiting in their apartment. Nothing was certain.

"I remember a lady with a little daughter..."

The previous tenants. So, those two had lived in the building for a long time.

“... but I haven't seen them in years. She could've sold the flat, but... I mean, maybe I just haven't seen her, that's it.”

“What if she's still in there with her daughter?”

He said it laughingly, Roman did not like it. Then there was a knock on the door.

“Hey, lady, are you there? Open up! It's the police!”

They laughed. Roman's heart was pounding. They were definitely not trustworthy, those assholes. Therefore, they were dangerous.

“Maybe she's not in Kyiv. Then the flat is ours now.”

“What if she sold it to someone?”

“And where is this someone now?”

“How the hell do I know? But maybe they've heard us, whoever they are... Hey, are you there?! Listen, something bad has happened, but... I guess, you're already aware... If you are there alone, we can, like, help you or... something. It's better to be with people... You know, it's really messed up if you're alone right now... So, you know... If you are there... If someone is in there, just... open the door and we'll talk, we'll give you some food. We've got food, there's a lot of food in the building. I mean, you won't just sit there forever, right?”

A pause.

*Why the hell are they trying to get in here? Is my apartment the only one that's locked in the whole building? It can't be! Is it possible? But... I mean, yeah, it's possible, I guess... I can't go out. I can't trust them. I hope they won't try to get in... Well, if they think there's someone in here, they won't try to break the door, right?*

*No... It doesn't mean shit.*

Then one guy said, “Do you hear something?”

“Nah...” the other replied.

“Maybe there is no one there?”

“Maybe... Although, I mean, how do we know? Maybe they just don't want to open it. Listen, we won't do anything to you... I mean, we're all together in this shit. We're not some freaks. If you think we're one of them and we're gonna kill you once you open the door... I mean, we're not... God, I don't know how to prove it... I mean, you've seen them in the streets, I guess. You understand we're not like them, right? If we were, we would just knock the door down.”

“Goddamn it, Ivan, you're talking to nobody.”

“Maybe. But we can't be sure. I mean, maybe they're just terrified, that's normal. Just... And you wanted to make sure we're alone here, right?”

*Damn, is my apartment the only one they haven't checked? No! I haven't heard any noise... But I was sleeping! What a moron! I should have been listening! What a freaking idiot you are, Roma! No, if they... Were they talking like that in front of every locked door? That would've been so ridiculous... Is every apartment open? That's insane! If they need to make sure the building is safe, they will break in. And then what? I can't kill them. What do I do? Open the door? But they won't trust me. Would they just let me go? After I wasn't opening the door for them? Again, there are no rules, what they say doesn't matter...*

“Listen, in case you change your mind...”

“Shut up, you idiot! Don't tell them where we are!”

“Okay. Well... If you change your mind, just... Umm... I mean, just go out and, like, call us, we'll hear. Please, if there is anyone in there, say something...”

A pause again.

“What if they come for us?”

“I mean, anyone can, the building is open, so... It doesn't matter. Yeah, by the way, those butchers, they are still out there, we saw one, like, two hours ago. He did not come here, but they are still, like, around, so... Just for you to know. Being alone is the worst option now, you know. If you are there, just... My name is Ivan, by the way, and my friend is Kostya. Just so you know who to call, whenever you... want. We'll be in the building, just go out the door and call for us.”

“Most likely, there is no one there, the apartment is just locked. Maybe try to open it up, say, tomorrow, or... I don't know, maybe even now?”

“And if there is someone in there? Don't you understand? I mean, maybe they have weapons! Hey, you! Yes, you, in the apartment! We will not try to break in, just... you know, you shouldn't be scared of us, we're not rapists or... I mean, nothing like that. You can't stay there for long, we have food, we've collected, like, everything in the building. So, you know, no reason for you to hide. We are not one of them and we are not bad. I mean, we're not the greatest people in the world, probably, but we won't hurt you.”

Roman kept listening silently. After awhile they went downstairs. Then there was a heavy noise somewhere on the first floor, it seemed. Then he heard their steps again. They were going upstairs. Roman crawled closer to the door, to hear better. The fifth floor! They closed a door on the fifth floor! Good enough. They wouldn't hear him moving around his apartment from that far.

*What were they doing down there? They've probably barricaded the main entrance. That would be reasonable on their part. I wonder what their windows face. If it's the playground, then okay, they won't notice me running away, but if they overlook the other side, then... Will they chase me? I doubt they will. What am I to them? Unless they want to kill me so I don't bring anybody else here. They will immediately understand that I am from this apartment once they see me running away... Damn...*

*Is my apartment really the only one that is locked? Mine and theirs, I guess... You freaking bastards, why didn't you escape or die last night? You're a problem now... My problem... But, I mean, they're trying to survive just like you. Well, one of us gotta survive, that's for sure. How do I get the hell out of here? Damn, this is a good place. Damn, the house would be mine if it weren't for those... assholes! And they've taken all the food too... Come on... What do I do? What do I do? For now, I've got some food. The veggies and the bread... The chips! That'll last me for a while...*

*Man, they might break in here. You don't know what they are. You can't judge them by the fact that they begged you to let them in. You have no idea what they're capable of. They sound like complete douchebags to me. The way they joked about having sex with that lady's corpse, oh my God! But,*

again, it's just a joke. They haven't yet had sex with any corpse, not that I've heard. But just the way they conduct themselves... I can't get along with such characters. But I will have to, right? Sooner or later, if I survive. People gotta stick together, the real people. Those who are left. They are right about that. But again, these are just words, you can't read their minds. I can't be sure what they will do if I come out to them.

No weapons, damn it... They might have weapons. Nah, they must have weapons... I guess the only right option is to flee... But they might see me. How to find out where exactly do they live? Go out, maybe... go up quietly, and listen to where the noise and voices are coming from? No, no, no, this is too damn risky. They might leave their apartment as I'm on the stairs, and then I won't have time to make it back. Unless... Unless I prepare to escape. Yes! Now this sounds like a plan to me, almost as good as suicide! I will gather up, pack my stuff, and then go upstairs and listen. And if I hear the door opening, I'll run downstairs, run out of the building and... well, yeah, run away from here.

Shit, barricades... They've set up barricades on the first floor. Maybe that's why they've done it! In case I try to escape. Or perhaps, so that no one sneaks in from the outside. It doesn't matter what the goal was, but if there are barricades, it will take some time to get through them. And while I'm making my way, they'll come down and... if they have guns... they'll either kill me or take me hostage. I don't know who they are. I would not torture them or rape them, but they are not me. I don't know who they are and what they are capable of. Well... that's a huge risk.

What could they barricade the entrance with? The door is open, it's clear... They could... Shit, there's that big mirror down there, they've probably blocked the door with it. But if so, then... Holy shit, could it make such a noise? Who knows... I don't even remember what the noise was... Something heavy hit the floor... Maybe that's what it was? But what's the point? If someone comes in from the outside, they won't hear. Or what? And if I'm careful, then I won't fall, I'll just leap over it. And I've heard them doing something, so they know I'll think it over. So why do they need the mirror?

*By the way, they could have taken any apartment, if they're all open. They've probably taken the one facing the driveway, so they could see if someone approaches the building. Yeah, they've thought of that if they're not stupid. That's what I would do if I were here alone... Bastards... Okay... I guess, the barricade is for me then. They don't need noise to know someone's come in from the street, they'll see it in the window. So, the mirror is there for me, in case I decide to run away. So, they've essentially declared a war. They think when I run away, I'll trip over, fall, and then they will catch me, grab me and... do something bad to me... something violent... They want to kill me. That's what the mirror is for...*

Roman finally got up. His hands were sweaty. He tiptoed back to the kitchen, trying to breathe as quietly as possible, although no one was listening behind the door. He put the knife on the table and sat down in the chair.

*You can't fall asleep. You can't sleep. They can come down here again... I... God knows what they're talking about right now. Perhaps they are discussing breaking in here and... Maybe they've already decided... And I'm sitting here, doing nothing... No... They're not idiots... I mean... They don't know exactly who might be here. They can't take risks that easily. They understand one of them would get hurt. At least one... If I was some Jackie Chan type of guy, they would all be dead. Someone's blood will be spilled if they make a move, for sure. So, they will not break in. Or maybe I don't understand something... Might be...*

*They are talking about it right now, that's clear. Planning... What's the best way to do it... What would be logical in their situation? There is no communication, no mobile phones, no Internet... They understand that I am here and will not contact anyone... They cannot let me out of their sight...*

*This means they have not gone to their apartment! They're still there behind the door... They just pretended to go away! Yes! But I... I can't move close to the door, I can't, they'll hear and maybe... I don't know, shoot through the door... I mean, who knows what's in their heads... And I can't look into the peephole, they'll notice that too. Damn... What do I do? They'll hear me moving. And? What will they do with that information? Knock down the door? I don't know what kind of weapons they have... Did they hear me go*



*back to the kitchen? Putting the knife on the table? Shit, is it that noisy? Don't think so... Let's say they've heard you, what's the plan now?*

*No, no way they are breaking in now... Well, they... They know now... If they've heard me make noise, they now know I'm here. And I didn't answer to them, so they... they understand that I'm scared... That's not good... Well... I mean, of course I'm scared. What are the odds of someone with a gun being here? And the right knowledge... Very little... They understand there is an unarmed person here. But what do I do?*

*I don't know if they are still there, really... This is all in my head... If they are, what will they do? I can't check if they're standing there... Gotta be quiet... They walk without shoes, apparently... I don't know... It was quiet, I mean... I don't really know... Perhaps they went downstairs, barricaded the door with the mirror, and then they decided one would go upstairs and demonstratively slam the door, so I would think they're gone and... And now they are together here, behind the door. But I could've hypothetically gone up to the door to look out and, therefore, learned about their plan... It's just... They understand it, why that clowning?*

*Or maybe it's really in my head? I can't risk it... I have to survive... They will kill me. What is their plan? Wait here... till I die or what? No, that's stupid... If they got their weapons...*

*They think I'll just come out? Seriously? They can't be expecting that! They are not even sure there is anyone here... Are they gonna wait in front of the door forever? Or are they just waiting for me to reveal myself? Then what? Let's say they know for sure someone is in here. Will they break in? It doesn't change anything... Regardless of how many people are here, breaking in is dangerous, they must understand that. They don't know what awaits them here... It makes no sense.*

*But could they just leave the door like that, seriously? Without checking what's inside? Just go back to their place? Maybe they're hoping they'll notice me leaving the house and then shoot me from the window... Sounds realistic... Yeah, right, they won't be just sitting there for hours...*

*Roman calmed down a little bit. He straightened up and went to the bathroom door again. Nothing could be seen through the peephole from*

there, only the bright daylight flowing on the landing from the high windows.

*They won't come for me now. They've got food, they most likely have weapons. Having searched through all the apartments, they must've found a lot. They definitely have a lot of knives. Yep. Most likely, their plan is to monitor the driveway. Who comes in and who comes out. They won't be standing outside my door all the time, and it's still a dangerous option for them to break in here. It's unlikely they have such a cool weapon to take such risks. I mean, they won't blow up the door, that's for sure. At most, they may have some sort of guns, and even that I'm not quite sure about.*

*It would just be reckless of them to walk around the building without something like that. Alright...*

Roman crouched down and crawled into the room. Then he straightened up, scolding himself:

*Dude, no one is behind the door. They aren't just standing there like idiots. That's ridiculous. Maybe they didn't lock their doors. Maybe one stands by the window and the other by the front door. Both are armed. If the door guy hears me go out, he whistles to the window guy and follows me down the stairs. And the window guy is preparing to shoot me once I step outside the building. Rather simple. And also, that makes perfect sense, yeah. It's a good plan as far as I can tell.*

*But what should I do in this case? I can't get out of here. Whenever I try, I'm at the risk of getting shot. Maybe I should try at night? It will be more difficult to spot me. Maybe they have some night vision devices? No, gosh, you're kidding? They're just some random scumbags, not freaking navy seals. They don't have that kind of shit. Therefore, I guess, if I try to escape at night, there is a chance. It's still pretty risky, but nevertheless... But, they can take a different position at night. In my neighbors' apartment, for example, behind the wall. To be closer... And don't forget it's gonna be dark... Phone! I'll light my way with the phone. Gotta save the charge...*

He sat on his bed.

*Again, it's risky. At night, they'll most likely wait for me outside the door, or move to the lower floors... But I have no choice, really. No, there is, I guess. Either run or wait... Not great options... Damn... Well, they won't get in*

*here, that's clear. Too dangerous. Maybe wait a couple of days? I have enough food for now, I guess... I've got water. The most important thing is to keep the phone charged, for I'll need a flashlight when I escape. Nighttime only. I hope I can slip away. Okay... Maybe I should do it tonight? Where do I go? I have no plan. Ocean Plaza is great... No, no. Wrong. This place is in plain sight, many people have probably already gathered there, so it's not an option. You need to look for something calm and quiet. Well... Some residential building... Let's say I step outside, where do I head next? I gotta be quick, for they'll chase me... there is a possibility they will. I shouldn't hang around, too. I should get as far from here as possible, get away from the windows. I gotta head for the highway, probably. And then up the street.*

The building Roman lived in, among a few others, was standing on a little hill. There was a set of stairs right beside his building leading to the highway. Don't confuse it with those spit-on-and-pissed-on stairs that led from the residential area to the Lybidska subway station and Interplaza supermarket. Two different sets of stairs, the latter was dirtier for there were always lots of drunkards hanging around the supermarket. They not only hung around, they spit and pissed, they vomited wherever, they brawled with each other, and they screamed at each other. All that stuff. Well, I mean, not anymore they didn't, but before the grand switch it had been a pretty usual image. So, Roman thought it would be a good idea to head for the first set of stairs, which was right by his building, as I've said.

*Should I stay on this side of the road? Will it be easier for them to catch me that way or... or what else they're gonna do? You gotta keep in mind they might very well run after you until you're dead. I mean, if they'll be really keen on killing you. Also, they might come after you together. That's another problem. And both might be armed with I still have no idea what. Then it is better to move very quickly to the other side of the highway and get lost among buildings and shops and trees. There are a lot of those. Shit, there must be a lot of corpses on the streets. Gotta prepare yourself for it.*

*Although, I mean, I'll run at night, so... I mean, if I run, I gotta run at night. Or maybe I won't have a choice... I don't know what can happen.*

*There must be a lot of dangerous people out there... And also murderers... Of course.*

*I gotta stay here for as long as I can. With murderers or some nuclear shit, I'm in as much danger here as I will be in the streets. Good God Almighty! It's been less than one day! Dude, at least you've survived one day. By doing nothing... Pure luck. And all the corpses out the window – those people were not as lucky, I guess. For some vague reasons. And had they just stayed at home, maybe... Although, apparently, a lot were killed by their family members, so... Yeah... Okay...*

*I'll stay here for now. In the evening, I'll eat... the chips. I'll probably eat the chips, that's a good idea, right? No! The chips will not spoil. Won't they? I mean... Can chips spoil? No, I guess not. I mean, the vegetables will definitely spoil faster. And the bread too. Gotta eat that first. How many veggies do I have? Five tomatoes and four cucumbers... Not much, but... that's something. I mean, it's obviously not nothing, so... Yeah... Well, I won't make a salad anymore, that's clear. But I can take, like, one tomato, cut it in half, and eat it with a slice of bread. And drink a cup of water. Here's your dinner. Not amazing, but... I mean, dude, you could eat, like, a raw block of instant noodles when you were a student. And that could be, like, all you ate for a whole day! It's a lot better than that, obviously. No reason to complain. Compared to that solid yellow block, half of a tomato, a slice of bread and a cup of water is an aristocratic dinner.*

That made him think of Gilbert Gottfried's "aristocrats joke". Even the day before, Roman had been able to watch it on YouTube while eating. Or one of Norm MacDonald's appearances on Conan O'Brien Show. Now Roman lived in a completely different reality, he could be killed at any moment. If several murderers who were working together (he still wasn't sure if it was a thing, yet it didn't stop him from assuming it was) sneaked into the building, if they were armed and ready to crush some skulls and stab everything that moved and was not like them, then they they would check all the apartments. Unlike those dudes from the fifth floor... With murderers there would be no hesitation and pauses in front of closed doors, there would be no fear and rationality, as with ordinary people.

They had broken in to kill his mom, they would break to kill him too. The end. Roman understood that he would not be able to do anything if there was to be a really serious raid. Unless they attacked those two dudes first, then there would be some small chance to escape from the building... But

where? He had nowhere to run. You would be going in a random direction. He also did not know and could not know how many people were left in general, how many murderers were left, where both of those were.

It was already dark at 6 PM. The brightness of the phone screen had to be as low as possible. As night approached, the ears became more sensitive to sounds. Roman heard that someone was in the building. Distant thumps. Those were the guys from the fifth floor. At 7 PM, they left their apartment and went downstairs. Roman could hear them chatting on the first floor. They weren't moving anything, just standing there, apparently. The conversation sometimes stopped, then became lively again. One time they laughed at something. Roman stood by the front door and listened with a frantic heart, trying to catch at least some individual words that would help him piece together at least some picture. What was those douchebags' plan? No answers. Although they didn't intentionally talk quietly, they were nevertheless too far away for him to discern anything.

*Perhaps, if they come out like that and talk so loudly, it's not about me. Or they're trying to fool me. They want me to think they are not planning anything. But I'm sure that's not the case. However, as long as I'm locked in here, there's no need to worry. They are not suicidal to break in here without knowing anything. I am safe for now.*

The boys were silent on the way back. Roman held his breath as they passed his door, convinced they could hear him breathing in the darkness. The boys did not stop.

*They aren't talking on the landing, for they assume I can hear it. Bastards... What are you up to, huh? How the hell am I supposed to get out of here?*

Roman had not eaten or drunk anything since the morning.

*God, I should've done it at least two or three hours ago...*

Now there was such silence around him it seemed that every rustle was as loud as the church bells. He opened the fridge and took the bread and the veggies into the kitchen. No electricity meant there was no point in keeping them there. He pulled out one wet tissue and wiped a tomato. Then he wiped a bottle of Morshynska with another one. And with the third one, he wiped his hands.

*Damn, I shouldn't be so wasteful. I probably ought to care about hygiene less during the apocalypse. Definitely. I can't use all the wipes I have in one evening.*

As planned, he cut the tomato into two pieces with the kitchen knife, took a slice of bread, and poured half a cup of water. All in the dim light of the phone, which was already at 76%. Roman sat down in the chair and began to eat, looking at the dark building opposite. He really wanted music.

*Just one song, no more.*

Roman put in the earphones. He chose one of the last songs he had downloaded. He'd done it solely because of the band. One Foundation. The song was called 'Teach Me Devotion'. He turned it on and started eating again.

He managed to bite twice before the guitar solo started. And when it started, Roman's eyes suddenly became wet, in just a second the tears began to flow like a shower. His nose filled with snot, Roman wiped it with his sleeve, then with a paper napkin. Every bad thing his mind had been keeping caged for the whole day broke free. The song was a bit sad, it definitely added to the effect. Mom's death, loneliness before the apocalypse, loneliness during the apocalypse. The fact that all the people he had ever communicated with were most likely dead. That he was stuck in that apartment and was afraid to get out. At the same time, he tried to cry quietly, because again, it seemed to him those dudes could hear. And was there really a point in his efforts to hide?

So he cried and cried. And then the singer's voice entered again, and it got even worse. It got to the point Roman thought, *Damn, should I kill myself with this knife now?! I mean, what is the point?! Why did I end up here and not with someone... With someone good, someone I love? Why am I alone? Goddamn it, why am I alone?! I don't want to be alone, yet I am! It freaking sucks! Why didn't I find anyone before this disaster? Why am I so worthless? Why did I even survive? I should've stayed with mom in Lviv, maybe I would've been able to protect her... Why was I given this chance? I've wasted everything in my life...*

He was really upset, you see. Roman thought about suicide for the second time since the grand switch.

After crying for about twenty minutes, Roman did finally finish eating his aristocratic supper and turned off the song that was playing on repeat. 68% left. Putting the phone down, Roman looked out the window.

He sat like that for about half an hour, and then, suddenly, something flashed in the window on the sixth floor of the building opposite. He took the phone with him for some reason and went into the room. Opened the caramel curtain, sat on the edge of the bed and started watching.

*It looked like a telephone. Damn, could they see mine? I mean, I have the brightness on minimum. What else could it be? Maybe someone accidentally turned on the flashlight? It seems so... Could be any device, really. Those two could see it too. What if it was them? Could they go there? What a dumb bastard, you shouldn't have listened to the song. Should've been listening to what's happening around you. Damn it! Now what?! They could've sneaked out while you had the earphones in. But... No, it won't do them any good, like, really. Or maybe they heard me cry? What is wrong with you?! But... If it's them in there, I still can't be seen, right? Not now when it's dark... They can't have night vision devices, we've already considered it. Unless... Or maybe they do? Maybe they rummaged through the apartments and found something? And then what? Went into another building to check me out?*

Frightened by this thought, Roman got out of bed right away and crouched under the windowsill.

*Think about it... Can it be? Well... If it's true, they... How do these devices even work? That's another thing you don't know shit about... What kind of devices could be here? Well... Let's say they've seen me here... Damn, so they do see I'm hiding now... They freaking know I'm afraid of them, I'm afraid they'll find me, find out that I am here... by myself... Well, does it change anything for me? Can they see I ain't got any weapons? Can they? Damn, I can still... I'm... I mean, I'm pretty tall, so... Of course, I'm skinny as a broom, but... Well, yeah, I guess it's hard to see I'm a wimp even with these kinds of devices... I mean, they're not that good. Or maybe they have devices that can detect wimps from the distance? Some hi-tech shit...*

*But still, I can hurt them in some way... I'm a loser, but I've got the knife, so... Beware, you bastards! Yeah... They definitely don't have a view of the*

bathroom, that's for sure, it can't be... It can't be, right? Or this place? They can't see me now when I'm hiding... How do these devices work? Can you see through walls with them? Damn, I don't know, how can I be sure? I don't know... I don't know! Maybe it's better not to hide, then? What if they shoot me from there? Can they? Shit... No, the wall will stop the bullet if they decide to shoot... Because...

Killing me would solve their problem, actually. If they saw me lying on the floor for a few hours, it would mean I'm dead and alone. So, they could then break down the door...

But, on the other hand, if there was still someone here, but he just... well, hid as soon as he heard the shot... No, they have been watching for a long time... They must have left the house while I was listening to the song...

But how could they know I was listening to music? Wait, really... How could they be sure that I wouldn't hear them go out, that I wouldn't go to the window and see them go into the other building? And wait, did they check that one too? They couldn't know what was there and... who could be there... No, especially now, when it's dark, it would be unwise to do such a thing...

What is my fear based on? On the fact that they might have found some kind of a superweapon and a night vision device in our building? Do you seriously believe that? In this old Soviet building?

Nah... I'm an idiot. It must've been something else. Maybe, another survivor accidentally turned on the phone or something... Yeah... Because if they had me at gunpoint for so long... they would kill me. I mean, if they had such a weapon. Yeah, I guess... Or even when I was sitting here, I pulled back the curtain, they saw me, and did not shoot? I mean, would they shoot? Maybe they were just checking to see if anyone was here? Think... Think logically... Dude, at least try.

What could it be? What's the chance that they could find some cool piece of equipment in an old freaking building on Lybidska, in a random apartment, that they knew how to use? Some random dicks who joke about necrophilia? You think it's possible? Okay, suppose they did. And what, they would just go into an unchecked building to do what? Kill me? Are you serious? Nah, dude... It's all in your mind. It's not them. They are most



*likely still on the fifth floor above you, getting ready for sleep... Well, one of them, the second will be on the lookout, I guess.*

It was nerve-wrecking, yet Roman straightened up and stood in front of the window. At first it was scary as hell, but then one, two, three minutes passed and no one shot him. He calmed down a bit. There was also no movement in the place where he had seen the flash before.

*If there was someone there, it was someone like me, someone who's just hiding. I can't say hello anyway, so... No reason to sit and watch, I guess... I'm almost sure it was just someone turning something on accidentally. I hope they don't see my phone. I better turn it on in the bathroom only. Or any place far away from the windows. What a mindless prick, you're constantly making mistakes. C'mon, think with your head, goddamn it. What an asshole you are! Okay, tomorrow we'll just do what we've done today, I guess. If there will be tomorrow. God I feel so tired.*

It was 10:13 PM when Roman felt tired.

*Okay, I'm gonna sit and watch for a little more... Maybe something flickers there again... Or they'll do something else, whoever they are... I think I gotta sleep with the knife. I gotta be ready for anything...*

Roman decided to put it under the bed, and to barricade the front door of the apartment with some stuff.

*Maybe they'll try to open the door with a skeleton key, then I might not hear them doing it. Who knows who these guys are... And they're not the only possible problem, I mean, there are probably thousands of people in the streets of this city now... Ordinary people and murderers. I don't want to meet neither of them.*

*These two... Maybe they hope to get in while I'm asleep. Of course, it's also unlikely, they don't know whether I'm asleep or not, but... anything can happen. I don't know how they see all of this, what they're now thinking about... What they were doing on the first floor, what they were talking about? It could have had something to do with me, too, but I don't know... I can't...*

Roman brought a little stool from the kitchen to the door and placed a dish on the edge of it. Hoping it would fall and make a noise if they tried to open

the door. And then he would wake up, grab the knife and...

*And then I would destroy them like Jean Claude would.*

Roman giggled.

*Nah, they'll probably kill me sooner or later.*

Roman also leaned his plastic mop against the door, so that it would fall once they broke in.

*Okay, this is good. You'll hear them. I mean, you've got to, right? Damn, I want to sleep. How much sleep did I even get? I woke up around 3 AM... Then I fell asleep in the morning... Then in the afternoon... God, I'm so tired. And I didn't eat properly... Damn, my stomach hurts. Good thing I don't want to poop. Maybe it's because of stress. Well, it's good, whatever the reason. I don't want to take a shit in the apocalypse. I mean, I'll have to, but... The later, the better. I could eat the chips now... No, you can't. Gotta save them for later.*

Roman's mouth watered.

*I said I can't eat them now, stop.*

He went to the kitchen to get the knife and returned to the room, lighting his way with the phone. He looked at his own barricade once more.

*I gotta hear. I hope I'll wake up. I've got to grab the knife quick. But then what? Death. Sooner or later it's going to happen anyway. So, either now or later. Do you really hope to last long in this shitty world? Well, if murderers kill each other, then maybe at some point there will be none of them left. Ordinary people are obviously easier to deal with. There is that one chance...*

He lay down, put the phone next to him, and the knife under the bed. He yawned. The stomach growled.

*Maybe I should turn off the phone?.. Nah, you don't have to... You're not using it anyway...*

*I gotta be quick in case... I gotta be quick.*

A minute passed.

Roman sat down on the bed. He thought he had no right to fall asleep without thinking through his plan. Which still was very vague.

*Well, you'll grab the knife, and then what? Then they will enter the room. They may have flashlights. Maybe you don't need to sleep in the room? Like, they will immediately go to the room, won't they? Yeah, they will count on me sleeping, so they will come here. The stool will hold them for a second, but not for long. It's not there to stop them, it's there to make noise. They will come here first. And also, they are probably assuming I'll barricade the door with something. They will consider it. That's why... That's why I'm still in a pretty bad position. My head won't work well right away. Damn, sometimes I get blurry eyes and nausea if I stand up suddenly. Oh God, if it happens, it will be a sight! I won't see properly, and they will be in the room, laughing at me. And if they have guns and flashlights, I'm done. Maybe sleep in the kitchen? For real! Close the door... Yes, it is better there. There are more potential weapons too. You can bombard them with dishes and cups! Oh yeah, baby. I don't have a lot of stuff here, so... Yeah, let's go to the kitchen.*

Roman searched for some clothes in the wardrobe, then spread it on the kitchen floor, making a nest for himself between the gas stove and the table. Then he carried the pillows and the blanket there. He left the door to the bathroom wide open, and closed the kitchen door so that there were as many obstacles as possible on the way to him.

*I'll hear them... I'll hear, I'll get up, I'll take the plates... Shit, I gotta take them all out...*

He did it. He put six plates by the stove. There were also two cups. He drank from the red one. The big white one had been mom's. She had visited him once that year. For the New Year.

*I'm gonna throw dishes at them like a freaking ninja. Yeah, that's the spirit! You're about to die, you stupid bastards. Freaking assholes! Better stay where you are!*

Roman sat down on the floor giggling, put the phone next to the pillow, and the knife by the table leg. Close enough for him to grab it right away.

*You probably have a chance... It is possible you will kill them. Maybe they are even weaker than you. This, of course, is unlikely, but, I mean, how do you know? Although, you gotta be prepared Vin Diesel and the Rock themselves will come for you. Then I gotta be Goldberg. Damn right, Roma.*

*I will freaking massacre them... And then the whole building is gonna be mine. I will just live here peacefully. These two are about to get deported to Hell.*

He giggled again, falling asleep.

## 6

Roman woke up at 7:08 AM. It was Sunday, the second day since the grand switch. Reflexively, Roman raised on his elbows and listened. It was quiet in the apartment. So, no one had broken in at night. The knife was in place, so was the phone. The door was closed.

*Everything's fine...*

Roman blew into his hand and sniffed.

*Jesus Christ...*

It was probably what Ripley felt when an alien breathed on her face in the third movie. Disgusting.

*Gotta eat something. Damn... the second day...*

Roman lay back on the pillow and switched off again.

He woke up at 9:04 AM. No changes, everything was the same. But he didn't want to sleep anymore. It was a sunny day outside the window.

Roman stood up, trying not to make any noise. The house was quiet.

*What if these two left while I was sleeping? So... Open the chips? Nah, save them. Maybe soon I'll have to run away. I'll need them then. Eat the bread. And the veggies... How long will they last without the refrigerator? Maybe not save them? Eat them, that's it. But then there will be no food. Well... At least eat one whole tomato this time. Or maybe make a salad? Isn't it stupid? Ah, what the hell, may as well do this.*

Roman went to the bathroom and pissed. The urine was orange like an orange. The toilet stank. Roman felt he would soon need to poop. It meant soon the toilet would stink even worse.

*Damn it, how can I flush? They'll hear me flush. Or won't they? Who knows, maybe they won't hear... Well, I'll hold it in as long as I can...*

He closed the lid. Checked if there was water. Surprisingly, there was. Roman did not even put his hand under the faucet, afraid to get poisoned. The water looked clean, though. That was bizarre to Roman.

*Not worth the risk. Shit! Could they hear me turning on the water? Goddamn it, what are you, a moron? Apparently so. Oh my gosh! What the hell are you doing? But, I mean, I turned it on just a little bit, a little stream. They most probably didn't hear. Maybe they won't hear the toilet flush, maybe I should go poop when I want?*

*Okay, let's assume they didn't hear. Easier to live this way. God... Should I wipe my hands? Nah, let's try not to. What is wrong with you, your dick is so dirty or what? Time to get used to the freaking apocalypse.*

Without wiping his hands, Roman returned to the kitchen, took the almost empty bottle of Morshynska, went to the bathroom again and rinsed his mouth twice.

And then he started cooking the breakfast. The phone was at 48%. It lay on the table while Roman, having rolled up his floor bed, wiped two cucumbers and two tomatoes with napkins. He peeled the cucumbers, grabbed the other half of the previous day's tomato, and cut everything into a deep caramel plate. Then added a bit of salt and a spoonful of oil.

It had been a traditional dish in their family. Grandma had made it for him in the summertime, with boiled potatoes. And mom had too, in the morning before school. She had served it with macaroni.

Roman smiled, remembering all this. He sat down at the table and ate in complete silence. Then he drank water. There was no option to wash the dishes, but Roman tore off several paper napkins and wiped the plate and the fork from grease.

*How many more times will I eat in this apartment?*

There were two cucumbers left, and also two tomatoes. Roman was running out of food. He knew it was stupid to not seriously plan the escape. But he had nowhere to go.

It would be so cool to head to some friends of his and find them alive and well. Like a scene from a good film. One of his friends was in Norway. The other one was in Lviv. There was no way he could ever see any of them

again. Those were the only people he had ever considered the real friends. They texted him at the night of the grand switch. He ignored them. There was nothing they could do for each other except say some trivial words.

*You should probably move up the street to the Druzhby Narodiv station. To that weird-looking House of Furniture. There are many residential buildings, small shops, you can probably hide somewhere. I think it will be quieter and less crowded there. Shouldn't go to Ocean Plaza. A huge supermarket is a bad place to stay... Although... No, I mean, if there was no one there... It would be like that George Romero's film... The one where they're in the supermarket... Would be romantic as hell, honestly. But, we don't have zombies, we have ordinary people consciously killing each other. At least it seems that way. They still have their memory when they're killing. With that kind of threat, how safe will it be? A huge area, with escalators, a lot of corners they can jump at you from. And I am alone. Nah. Bad idea. Maybe some day, when a lot of time has passed, when there will definitely be no one there, then I will go to Plaza, and for now I need to settle down in a quieter and smaller place... I mean, you can walk around the area, explore.*

*In fact, if I find a base for myself, without people, then everything will be fine. I will find some food for myself. A snowfall soon. It will be kinda cool to be alive. Apocalyptic winter... Maybe I should record what's happening? Maybe it will be important for someone in the future? I liked to write in school... Not a bad idea. If only those two went somewhere... Or got killed... Maybe I need to consider this? Go out, earn their trust and then kill them when they least expect it. But I think the chance is already lost. Maybe if I showed up to them yesterday, then... Now they wouldn't trust me, after I didn't respond to them, didn't open the door. No, this wouldn't work, sadly. And would you even be able to kill them if they let you in? Then it would probably be wiser to stay with them, right?*

*But is it smart, again, to trust someone? I don't know how people switch. Can it happen now, with these two, or with me? If so, then I can't trust anyone at all. And this means that I am doomed to be alone for the rest of my life... Or until... Until the authorities somehow solve this problem, if they're doing it at all or planning to do it. Maybe there are some refugee camps somewhere? But how can you find out? I don't even know what's*

*going on around this building. Do these guys know? No, if they didn't go anywhere either. And there is no connection with anyone. Maybe the government has started to do something already... evacuating people somewhere... But how do you know who to evacuate? If murderers are just... ordinary people like me...*

At 11:23 AM, Roman noticed a movement in the window on the sixth floor of the building opposite. The same place he'd seen the flickering. Someone was there. Roman again ran into the room and sat down by the windows. This time he could potentially be seen, so it was necessary to be as careful as possible.

After a minute, his legs hurt. Roman crawled to the wardrobe, took out a blue autumn jacket, which he had last worn to the university, spread it by the windows and sat down comfortably. It was much better that way.

For a very long time, no movement was there, but then a figure of a girl with straight blond hair flashed in the same window.

*Why the hell isn't she hiding? Wait... When I'm sitting in the kitchen, am I visible too? No, she has... The windows in her kitchen face the street, I have a balcony. Damn, why is she so reckless? I mean... Anybody can see her.*

It would be fair to admit she wasn't really standing by the window, waving her hands. She obviously tried to spend as little time as possible in sight, and when she did approach the windows, she bent down. But you could still see her just for a second.

The only thing about her Roman could make out was the hair and her gray sweater.

*Is she alone in there? Shit... That's who was shining a flashlight! Or whatever the hell it was. Is she stupid or what? They've seen her too, for sure. What will they do now? Nothing, probably. Maybe they even know her if they grew up on the same street. Yes, it is quite possible. But they definitely haven't exchanged any signals... yet. Or I didn't see it, just... Shit, what if she saw me? And now she can somehow tell them about me? Well... Will it change anything? They still won't break into the apartment... Yeah... Right...*



*And what if they don't know each other? Suppose they also noticed her, as I did? What will they do? Well, they don't need too much trouble now, I guess, unless they are really messed up. It's unlikely... Yeah, it's unlikely... They probably won't do anything, what's the point? They will just observe, they will just know someone is there, and that's all. And what should I do? Well, nothing has changed for you, really. Just don't move anywhere. Don't let them discover you're here. But you'll run out of food soon... I can definitely stay here for another three days, not a problem. One day I may not even eat, but then... I will have to go out. Or... No, you can't go into other apartments, you can easily bump into them. And they will hear the door open, they will come down immediately...*

There was no more movement in the window. But Roman kept watching. There was nothing else to do anyway. He sat on his jacket on the floor with his hands on his knees. Sometimes he yawned. Sometimes he thought about something. About his life before the grand switch, for example. He had always been a rather sad person. There had been suicidal thoughts. But for some reason he was alive still.

At least there had been a job before. And a family. Mom. Sometimes he had talked to his friends, not very often, but still, not about something really important, but still. Now he didn't have any of that. Now the world was full of shit. I mean, even more so than before.

All you could do was to live somehow while you could. Was there any point in planning anything at all?

At 1:02 PM, a girl came out of the building opposite. The same white hair. It was her! At first, she moved very cautiously. Having approached the playground, she looked at the windows of Roman's building. He was watching closely what she was doing, but at the same time he was hiding so that she wouldn't notice him. Then she nodded in the direction of Interplaza. So, she wanted to check the supermarket. But who was she nodding to?

*Probably, to the guys from the fifth floor. So they do know each other!*

She was responding to something with signs. Sometimes she looked around. Finally, she hurried across the playground to Roman's building. He immediately got up and went to the front door to listen. The door upstairs

opened and footsteps were heard. The boys went down. Roman heard their cheerful voices.

“What did I tell you, dude? It was her!”

“Dude, we both saw her father dying. I thought she did, too.”

“God, it’s crazy! Holy shit!”

“We gotta check her house if she hasn’t done it yet.”

“Of course we will.”

*Damn it... They really know her.*

It was a serious blow. Judging by the way they were talking as they came down, they had no intention to hurt her. Now they did not seem dangerous at all to Roman. On the contrary. And the fact that they were walking past his apartment and talking loudly... Maybe they really thought there was no one in there. Perhaps they hadn’t planned to break in and he had just made it all up.

*Maybe open the door now. Just... Try to explain that you didn't want to... risk... Like, that's understandable... It's not weird, is it? I just didn't know who they were. I couldn't be sure. But coming out now would be... it would be weird, I mean, they're having a moment...*

They were already coming back. Now there was also a woman’s voice.

“No, I haven't seen you.”

“Damn, it's crazy. You’re, like, the only person I know from there. Dude, I’ve told you we’re in some kind of matrix...”

“Yeah, can’t wait for Morbius to show up.”

“It’s Morpheus.”

“Nobody cares.”

“Alyona, sorry I'm so... like... happy, okay? Just... It’s so great you’re here...”

“No, it's okay. I've already... I mean, I gotta get over it fast, or I won’t survive myself. Have you checked the highway?”

“The hell with the highway! We’ve got all the food in this building, everything! Guess what, only two apartments were locked when we came

out to check yesterday. I mean, two not counting ours. The apartment of our next door neighbors was locked, and that one.”

They were passing by Roman’s door. He listened silently.

“Someone might even be there. You know, hiding like we are, afraid to come out.”

“Did you knock?”

“Sure. Nothing.”

“Oh...”

“What I’m saying is there’s no point in going anywhere. We have enough food for like... I don’t know. There’s a lot of food, trust me. You’ll see! Crackers, vegetables, fruits, a lot of preserved food! Cucumbers, tomatoes, mushrooms. Oh my god, and a lot of jams. Different kinds! There was probably some grandma living on the second floor. I don’t know where she is, probably... Well, you know... But her apartment wasn’t locked and there were, like, dozens of jars! We’ve taken it all to our apartment. You know, just in case.”

“You could’ve just moved into her flat...”

“Oh... Damn, I guess we could’ve.”

The door slammed on the fifth floor.

*They’ve mentioned my apartment. So, they really don't give a shit. But it isn't smart, I am a threat to them while I'm here... They... No! They knew they were passing by, right? And they were saying those things on purpose! So that I wouldn't guess what their real intentions are. Maybe they do have some plan. Maybe that girl saw me! Yeah... And they came down to meet her on purpose, to warn her about me, tell her what she should and shouldn't say. When could she see me? Doesn't matter... I was careful, but... maybe I've made a mistake...*

Roman sat down on the edge of the bed in front of the windows.

*Is there a chance they're good people and I'm just making all this stuff up? Maybe it's not too late? How do I just show up to them now, after almost two days of hiding? Maybe sneak out of the building at night, and then show up, like I've come from somewhere... else? What if they notice me*

going out? Then it's over. And if I make it out and come back, will they trust me then? Why should they trust some random dude? And what will I tell them? They all know each other, and I am a stranger. I will be nervous, I won't be able to explain everything... I mean, make my story believable. I will fail somewhere, I will say something wrong. And they've grown up here, that's obvious. I don't even know the numbers of the buildings around. The building opposite, for example... How to explain where I'm from, how I've got here? They will start questioning me, and I will stutter... Is it possible to tell a partial truth? That I was renting an apartment somewhere... not so far from here or... And then it all happened and I escaped...

What if they do let me in, and then ask me to show my place? I won't know anything... I mean, why would they ask such a thing? It might be dangerous, right? I can refuse, say there are murderers there, so it's not safe. This is also stupid. I mean, murderers aren't sitting at one place like we are. It won't work.

And they can catch me when I try to run away. Maybe they don't have weapons, but... Damn, this house would be so good to stay in... If only I opened the door for them earlier! Well... That's it, you can't go back. What do I do?

Wait, what are you thinking?! Did you forget? They might turn into murderers later, you can't trust them. Or maybe they are murderers now, and they're just pretending to lure me in? No, it can't be... You're making this up, Roma, it's all in your head... But you gotta run away... And how, if they... Maybe, they have a plan and are expecting me to make such a move? It is a possibility... No, it isn't. It's all in my head, damn it... But... I mean, it's kinda strange that she left the building and immediately started communicating with them. Like she knew they were here.

No, maybe they recognized her right away, and then waved, and... it worked out... She lost her father, didn't she? It was also mentioned... So why were they so cheerful? Am I not understanding something? And then one of them even apologized for that. Maybe that was also said on purpose, to fool me? So I'd be like, well, he apologized, so it's all true. But why would they do it?

*Damn... Roma, it can't be... It just can't be... They're just old friends... Roma, you're making this all up... But if they were playing, it would be to catch me. So I'd begin to see them as some innocent people and decide they really had no weapons and they wouldn't chase me. So I would try to escape and they would bust me. And kill me right away...*

*Maybe they've known I'm here from the very beginning? Maybe last night, when it all began, they texted this girl when there was still internet, and she said she'd seen me before, that she knew who lived here. And they agreed they would play me... But... No... No, Roma, Good God Almighty, it can't be like that! They... They couldn't... It's just too complicated. Why? I'm not even armed, I'm not dangerous at all. They don't know it, though...*

At that moment, Roman saw a squad for the first time. It consisted of ten people, various ages, variously dressed, marching from the spit-on-and-pissed-on set of stairs in unison, like trained soldiers. Then they split up and entered each of the three entrances of the building opposite. Roman crept to the window and knelt down. His blue jacket was still there on the floor.

# 7

Roman quickly understood: they might check his building next. He panicked again. His body started shaking. He got up and quickly ran for his backpack.

*What should I take? The chips... Sure, I'll need them. Shit, should I... should I warn them or not? But they must have seen them too, they must have been watching the windows. God, what if they didn't?! Damn it... The veggies, I should take the veggies...*

He grabbed the pack with the vegetables and froze, uncertain what to do. Then, cursing himself, he threw them into his backpack.

*Faster! You moron! They're gonna get you!*

He stood by the front door, pulling his jeans over his house pants.

*They'll be like underpants. It will be cold soon. My phone! Is there any charge left? 43%... Okay... Take it... Maybe you'll find a power bank somewhere or... something else. For now, it's gonna be your flashlight...*

The door opened on the fifth floor. The three ran downstairs without saying anything. Roman reached for the key sticking out of the lock, almost raised his voice, but then stopped himself. He returned to the kitchen, grabbed the notebook and a pen, also threw them into his backpack.

*Maybe I'll write something... Maybe I'll write something...*

When he returned to the door and began to put on his shoes, there was no noise on the stairs. The three had escaped.

*There was no need to... I don't know them... And I shouldn't have stopped them, I mean, they're running for their lives right now. And they wouldn't have stopped anyway... I would've only wasted their time... And my time... No reason to... Come on... Faster... My laptop! I can't fit it in the backpack... Damn, there are so many pictures... Not just porn, I mean, a lot*

*of memories... Pictures of me and my mom... And my friends... No, none of it matters right now... I gotta hurry... Come on... You've still got time... They've escaped and you will... Up the highway... Away from those... murderers... You've still got time... They're still checking the other building... There's still time...*

Roman put on his backpack, grabbed the hat and put it on his head. Then he checked if the phone was in his pocket and looked around the apartment. He'd done the same thing every time before going to work. Now he realized he would probably never return. It was kinda sad. He opened the door...

*Maybe they're waiting for me to come out... Maybe it's all been their plan...*

But there was no one on the landing. He crossed the threshold of the apartment. There was no noise downstairs. Roman turned and locked the door with the key, then hid it in his pocket and ran down the stairs.

*Maybe I'll come back after all... Maybe I'll come back after all...*

Nothing blocked the entrance. There were no barricades. The big mirror stood in its place, just like before the grand switch.

Under almost naked trees in front of the building, five corpses lay with skin white as porcelain. The wind was blowing golden leaves over them. A young beautiful woman with dirt under her black fingernails. A man with a head cracked open, his gooey brains in gray dirt. Two teenage boys with long hair, about two feet away from each other, with stab wounds on their backs. And an old lady with a leash in her hand. On the first morning after the grand switch, she had foolishly tried to escape with her dog.

Roman didn't look at the corpses, he quickly made it to the set of stairs by his building and ran down to the highway. And there, he stopped.

His body shook and he folded in two like a paper man. Leaned with the weak palms on the no less weak knees. Mykola Mikhnovsky's Lane was littered with corpses. There were several broken cars on the highway. Every seven feet there was a body, it seemed. There were women and children there. Everyone's injury was different. Roman felt dizzy in his head, like he was about to fall. But he resisted. He breathed deeply and tried to calm down.

*Dude, you should've been ready to see this... You gotta run... But where? Where did those three run, I wonder? You gotta move, you can't just stand here...*

Roman straightened up again and took two steps towards the road, still not sure if he was going to cross the highway or just run up the street. And then he saw another squad. As with the first one, the people moved synchronously. It reminded Roman of Chinese military marches he'd seen on TV as a kid. Those people's moves had been so robotic. Individuality had been blurred in the name of the big machine of destruction.

It was the same here, minus the military uniform. The murderers wore civilian clothes, each armed with either a knife, or a rifle, or a pistol, or a stick. They each held a weapon in hand, ready to use it. Again, people of completely different ages. Roman saw two little girls who were not older than ten. There was also one old man, in a torn blue shirt, with a gray beard and almost bald. They marched in two columns, ten people each.

A woman in her thirties in a blue sweater was the first to turn her head towards Roman, noticing him. After that, everyone turned their heads in his direction. The columns stopped. A seventeen-year-old girl with long, straight black hair holding a rifle pointed the weapon at Roman and took aim.

He thought, *Jesus Christ! I think I'm about to get murdered!*

Then he turned away and managed to take only one step towards the stairs, towards home, before he turned into another corpse on the cold asphalt.

The squad then continued to move down the street.



# THE MUSIC MENTIONED AND THE MUSIC I LISTENED TO WHEN WRITING

Brian Eno & John Cale – *Spinning Away*

Brian Eno – *Needles In The Camel's Eye*

Fruit Machine – *The Wall*

William Basinski – *dlp 1.1.1*

William Basinski – *El Camino Real*

Joni Mitchell – *You Turn Me On I'm A Radio*

Joni Mitchell – *Electricity*

Joni Mitchell – *All I Want*

Joni Mitchell – *Barangrill*

Joni Mitchell – *Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire*

Bent – *I Remember Johnny*

Bent – *A Ribbon For My Hair*

Bent – *I Love My Man*

Odd Nosdam – *Trish*

Enya – *Exile*

Enya – *Orinoco Flow*

Enya – *Caribbean Blue*

Enya – *Watermark*

Enya – *Aldebaran*  
Seefeel – *Charlotte's Mouth*  
Seefeel – *Signals*  
Seefeel – *Phazemaze* (from their Peel Session)  
The Beatles – *Blue Jay Way*  
The Beatles – *Across The Universe*  
Syd Barrett – *Boogie 2*  
Aphex Twin – *Rhubarb*  
Slowdive – *Crazy for You*  
Slowdive – *Dagger*  
Slowdive – *Sleep*  
Slowdive – *I Saw The Sun*  
Lush – *Monochrome*  
A.R. Kane – *Spermwhale Trip Over*  
Ozean – *Scenic*  
Ozean – *Fall*  
Ozean – *Porcelain*  
μ-Ziq – *Goodbye, Goodbye*  
μ-Ziq – *The Fear*  
μ-Ziq – *Scaling*  
One Foundation – *Teach Me Devotion*  
Virginia Astley – *With My Eyes Wide Open I'm Dreaming*  
Virginia Astley – *Waiting to Fall*  
Martha Reeves and the Vandellas – *Nowhere to Run*  
Robbie Basho – *Orphan's Lament*  
Bruno Coulais – *Dreams Are Dangerous* (OST Coraline)  
Bruno Coulais – *Ghost Children* (OST Coraline)  
Young Rascals – *How Can I Be Sure*

The Incredible String Band – *Chinese White*

Eternal Triangle – *Nothing But a Friend*

Opus III – *It's A Fine Day*

Boards of Canada – *Poppy Seed*

Boards of Canada - *Turquoise Hexagon Sun*

Boards of Canada – *One Very Important Thought* (Boc Maxima version)



